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IN VALLOMBROSA

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# IN VALLOMBROSA

A SEQUENCE

BY

ADELINE SERGEANT

Author of

*'No Saint,'*

*'The Story of a Penitent Soul,'*

*'Out of Due Season,' Etc. Etc.*

*'As autumnal leaves that strew the brooks  
In Vallombrosa, where th' Etrurian shades,  
High over-arched, embower.'*

*'The old order changeth, giving place to the new.'*

LONDON

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1897





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**Inscribed**

**WITH AFFECTIONATE GRATITUDE**

**TO**

**LEADER SCOTT**

**WHOSE KINDNESS MADE A RECENT SOJOURN IN**

**FLORENCE DOUBLY DELIGHTFUL TO THE**

**AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK**

**LONDON, *September* 1896**



IN VALLOMBROSA

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# IN VALLOMBROSA

*'Nature comes sometimes'  
And says "I am ambassador for God."*

*I felt the wind soft from the land of souls.'*

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

## I

WHEN she first came up from Florence to the heights of Vallombrosa for a breath of cool and bracing air, she found the delicate wind-flowers still in blossom and a few violets and primroses in the woods. The city had been gradually growing hot and oppressive during those last days of May, but while her carriage climbed the mountain roads she felt as though the seasons had been put back again and as if she

A



had exchanged glaring summer for an early spring. There was even a touch of coldness in the deep shadow of the trees.

She had disdained the little mountain railway and chosen to drive from Pontassieve, but the horses were barely strong enough for their work, and she relieved them of her light weight by walking for a mile or two among the pines, gladly inhaling their fragrance at every breath she drew, and pausing now and then to gather some dainty wild flower at her feet, or to let her eye wander lovingly down the dim vistas which the rows of pine trees opened out on either side. Presently her slender-limbed horses were reinforced by two great, gentle, snow-white oxen, which, harnessed in front of the tired animals, drew the

carriage slowly and steadily up the long, straight road which ends before the convent walls of Vallombrosa. The driver of the wood-cart from which the oxen had been detached for her service—a lean, brown, keen-faced old man in velveteen waistcoat, brown breeches and broad-leafed hat—walked beside his team, cracking an enormous whip at intervals, and addressing his oxen in low-toned, affectionate entreaty, as though they were petted children of his own.

The season had not begun, and none of the hotels near the monastery itself were open; even *Paradiso*, up among the trees whose leaves still strew the brooks in Vallombrosa, where the cells of the hermits used to be, and where Milton, they say, was aforetime entertained—even *Paradiso*

was closed against visitors; and she was obliged to leave her carriage at the monastery gates on account of the roughness of the road, and walk up to the higher ground near the little railway station at Saltino, where, on a terrace overlooking the valley of the Arno and a petrified sea of Apennines, a certain palazzo has been turned into a hotel for summer visitors. Even here the establishment was not yet on its summer footing. A man and a woman servant divided the work between them; the *Direttore* sat in solitary state in his bureau, with nothing particular to do. The two or three visitors who came and went seemed scarcely to dispel the utter quiet of the place. Later on, as June deepened and the city grew unbearable, every hotel at Vallombrosa and Saltino

would be invaded by a host of shrieking and shouting visitors, Italian and German, who would smoke and flirt and chatter in the sacred solitudes until half the charm was gone. But their time was not yet, and to Cecily Marchmont it seemed a great advantage that she should have the Castello almost entirely to herself.

She fell in love with the building, although it was somewhat bare and square of outline, and less relieved with loggia and balustrade than might be welcome to some eyes; but its colouring pleased her—the deep red tiles of the roof contrasting with the rough grey stones, which reminded her a little of the great old palaces of Florence,—the cool shadows of the quadrangular courtyard, where massive iron rings were

still hanging, although the horses were gone and the stables had been turned into drawing and dining-rooms. She liked the carved shields between the windows, and the projecting rods for swinging-lamps, and the broad stone steps before the doors. Inside, the beautiful parqueted floors and ornamented ceilings, the quaint solidity of the fittings, the finely fashioned iron-work, showed all too plainly that the house had been meant for better things than to become a caravanserai for passing travellers; but for this very reason it fitted itself to Mrs Marchmont's taste. She was not in the mood for ordinary hotel life: she wanted a little leisure and solitude and space in which to think of things that had happened to her, of things present and things to come.

Long hours would pass, long mornings,

long afternoons, when all the world around her seemed perfectly still and silent, and nothing broke the monotony of the sunny hours. Her rooms were situated on one side of the courtyard, with a door opening from a little corridor on a loggia, which made a good walking place in bad weather, and with a little flight of steps from her sitting-room to the garden. She used to take her chair and table to the broad slab of stone at the head of the steps, when the sun was not too strong, and try to read or write; but the fascination of the wide prospect often drew her eyes and her thoughts from the open page. It was difficult to think of printed or written words, when the world seemed to be lying out before her like a map. The alternations of light and shade, the





gradations of colour on the hillsides, the rolling wreaths of white mist in the valley, seemed, in some occult way, more important than all the complications of social or political life. And this was for her a new experience: she had almost always been deeply interested in human things—in the relations of human beings to each other, in the ever-varying drama of the human soul.

For a day or two the weather was cold after her first arrival at the Castello d'Acquabella, as her hotel-palazzo was called, but after a little rain and mist the sky cleared, and she was able to sit out of doors all day long. She always remembered one morning, not remarkable in other ways, for the soothing influence that the scene conveyed to her. There was a sunny mist over the

valley, a soft, faintly blue mist, that rose from the bed of the river and shrouded the ridge of the distant hills. Mount Morello, indeed, stood up clear yet faint, but beyond it the mountains were invisible. Florence, dimly seen as a rule, low down in the valley, had entirely disappeared from view, but Arno lay, like a winding white ribbon dropped between the hills. Now and then a little wind blew, and then the mist grew paler; but out towards the west the nearer hills stood up distinct in the sunlight, and the landscape was darkened only by an occasional shadow thrown on the young woods and the green meadows by a passing cloud. The green fields in the foreground were perfectly sunny and still. It was this change and contrast in the wide expanse of hill and vale, this constant in-

teraction of sun and shade, which made the outlook so attractive. As the sun grew stronger, some deep dividing shadows between the western hills began to grow purple and distinct, but southward the country lingered still enwrapt in its silver veil of mist.

Nor were the sounds of the district less tender and soothing than the delicate colours of the earth and sky. There was a low continuous murmur in the distance, which might have proceeded either from the torrent in the ravine or the fir trees on the hill. A few voices of workmen or servants, vaguely heard, seemed only to enhance the stillness; the *grilli* kept up their curious chirping noises; there were finches calling aloud to each other in the trees. Now and then came a tremulous sound of thunder from the hills,

or the quick stroke of an axe resounded faintly through the woods. The sound of a church bell, miles away, floated from the valley to the listener's ears, bringing with it a vision of village altars and thoughts of prayer. A homelier sound came from the cow bells, which tinkled in uneven measure in the meadows near at hand. And every few minutes a bee would go buzzing along in the sunshine which lay warm on Cecily's hands and feet, and she would note a red-brown butterfly in the tall white clover, or a darting green lizard among the stones. Every moment she found something to dream over, something to admire, and the golden Italian sunshine enfolded her like a benediction.

It was such a change—she thought to herself — such a complete change! A change even from Florence, where she

had spent six happy, shining months, full of pleasures of all kinds—social, literary, artistic ;—fuller still, perhaps, of new suggestions and associations, called into being by the majestic outlines of Santa Croce, or the cypress avenues of San Miniato, the wonderful symbolism of Taddeo Gaddi, the mysticism of Botticelli. These things meant more to her than the outside facts of her life: she had put away from her certain haunting, horrible memories of the past while she walked the gay Florentine streets, or knelt before Orcagna's shrines and Andrea's altar-pieces with the half-devout, half-careless, wholly familiar, Italian crowd. Her own troubles ceased to concern her very much in the cloisters of San Marco and Certosa. As she stood in Savonarola's cell, or trod the stones where Dante's feet had trod, the per-

plexities of her life fell away from her and showed their real insignificance beside the memory of men whose life-problems had been of so much greater import than her own. It was not that she had become suddenly callous or hard-hearted—Cecily's faults had never lain in that direction—but that she seemed to have stepped quite out of her own real world into one of beautiful dreams. Even the many pleasant and interesting persons, strangers like herself, or members of the English colony in Florence, whom she met during the six months of her stay, seemed sometimes like shadows in comparison with the greater men of other days, whose heart and soul and mind had been poured out upon the buildings, churches and palaces around her, who had written their names, not only on the pages of



history, but on the foundations of the city, on the very stones at one's feet.

She knew, throughout all, that her troubles and perplexities were only sleeping :. they were not dead. Some day they would start up again, real, vivid, pressing—draining the life-blood from her veins, weakening her hold upon the wide world without—and she would be obliged either to face them or to own herself vanquished in a fruitless fight. She knew it all the time that her feet trod the busy, many-coloured streets, and her eyes smiled at the piles of roses and lilies on the stone seats of the Strozzi palace, and her lips spoke pleasant things to the friends with whom she drove out to Certosa, or visited the Uffizi and the Belle Arti. A consciousness, or sub-consciousness, of this was the skeleton at

the feast, the shadow lurking in the sunlight. But it seemed so far away that it almost served to give zest to her enjoyment of life; and when it drew nearer she averted her eyes. There was a glamour upon her, rainbow-tinted—an atmosphere of sunlight, beauty, love.

She had left it behind in leaving Florence, or so she thought, and yet she brought away a sense of soothed contentment to which she had long been a stranger. She had felt no great reluctance in abandoning the beautiful city for the solitudes of Vallombrosa. The quietness had a charm of its own, and easily linked itself to the keener delights of the winter that she had passed. And there had been just one or two disturbing influences in Florence which she was glad to escape. She had not been

conscious of these at first, but they had gradually forced themselves on her notice until she felt that it was best for her to withdraw before they became irresistible. And here, in her loneliness, she began to understand how great the force of these influences might have been, and the effect of them upon her life. It was, perhaps, a good thing that the doctor had ordered her to try the bracing air of the Apennines before she travelled north.

North! Did she want to travel north at all? Would it not be better for her to avoid England at least? She might go to the Black Forest, to Switzerland or the Tyrol. England was the place of all others that she desired to avoid. And until it became too hot she thought herself perfectly content at the Castello d'Acquabella, just above the wooded slopes

of Vallombrosa — a name which carried refreshment to the ears in its very syllables.

She liked the place and she liked the people. The *Direttore* was seldom seen, except in his little bureau near the door, or on the roads directing the progress of building and repairs in certain hotels under the same management, at Vallombrosa; but he was extremely polite, if not conversational, and so quiet in his movements that his presence in the house was seldom remarked. In the wide halls and long corridors, the broad staircases and lofty rooms, it would have taken a score or two of persons to remove the impression of silence and solitude. It startled Cecily at first to find herself at night so remote from other human beings; for her rooms

opened out of the loggia on one side of the courtyard, and were situated, therefore, between the main body of the house and the 'wing,' where probably the servants' quarters had once been placed before the palazzo was turned into a hotel. A passage through this wing led to the large dining-rooms and drawing-rooms which had been made out of the stables, forming two sides of the quadrangle, and an open archway gave a wide prospect of fir-covered hills across the unkempt space of grass which did duty for an attempted tennis lawn. About half-past nine on the first evening after her arrival Cecily found her carafe empty and rang for some water. But no one answered her bell: no one appeared. At last she opened the door of her little corridor and walked out on the loggia.

All the windows that she could see were dark. She tried the door into the main part of the house, but it was locked: into the wing, but it was locked also. The drawing-room, which had doors opening into the courtyard, was likewise closed, and an appeal to various outdoor bells produced no result. Mrs Marchmont descended the steps of the loggia, walked round the courtyard, and out at the gateway (there was no gate), whence she surveyed the massive building, with its closed doors and high, dark windows, and realised, with a sense half of amusement, half of something like alarm, that everyone had gone to bed, and that she was as much cut off from the other occupants of the house, as it she lived in another hotel. There was apparently no way of communicating

with them, unless it might be by throwing gravel at the windows in turn until somebody was awakened. Probably it had not occurred to anyone that a lady could possibly want anything after nine o'clock.

She retreated to her own sitting-room with a slight, curious feeling of panic, which presently changed to laughter. 'I am out of the world indeed,' she said to herself; 'I might be dying or dead before anyone knew! And suppose burglars came—'

But burglars were unknown in that corner of the Apennines. For a night or two she entertained vain fears as to what she should do if unknown hands came knocking at her outer door at midnight, or if there were a stealthy attempt to unfasten her windows from without; but gradually these fears disappeared—

less from her persistent care in locking and bolting herself into her quarters than from a growing belief in the gentle disposition of her neighbours, rich and poor. The lads who herded the cattle in the meadows, the labourers who were building the new hotel near Saltino—a stone's throw only from the Castello—the woodcutters and foresters on the hills, seemed kindly and simple folk, fond of their children, peaceably inclined to all men, always ready to give her a friendly greeting when she passed them on the road—a soft ‘*Felice notte, Signora*’—with a courtly lifting of the broad-leafed hat, and a smiling flash of white teeth that lighted up the brown face like sunshine on the bare hillside. There were, no doubt, dark sides to the natures that turned their gentle



aspects towards her. Now and then she heard sounds of wild revelry from the little wine-shop on the Saltino road, near the railway station, when all the rest of the world was still, now and then some story of want or sorrow reached her ears; but for the most part the people seemed to have taken on that touch of grace which is rarely found in other countries or in less beautiful surroundings.

In the morning after her vain attempt to summon a servant, Adriano came to her with a half-smiling, half-apologetic face. Adriano was the head waiter—the only waiter for the present, in fact—a tall, spare, grey-haired man, with the white moustaches of an old soldier and the manners of a courtier. A man who looked like a prince, and was the

most admirable waiter in the world ; and Adriano came to say that he had seen from the electric register that madame's bell had been rung during the night, and to inquire, with respectful sympathy, whether madame had wanted anything. The question was unnecessary under the circumstances, but Adriano's tender inquiries could not but soothe the most ruffled feelings, and Cecily was almost ashamed to own that she had wanted drinking-water at that most unholy hour of half-past nine. Adriano regretfully informed her that they were all usually asleep at that time, but promised to speak to Cesira, and remind her of the empty carafe. Cesira was forgetful, it was true, but what could you expect? She had had great troubles—great troubles *la povera!* She was a

widow, and had lost her children one by one—the last, a fine young man of twenty, who had died of consumption down there in Florence in spite of all the doctors could do for him. Yes, Adriano himself was married and had children—three little children, who lived with their mother in a neighbouring village — where he was going to pay a visit before the summer season began. Then he bowed and smiled and withdrew, leaving Mrs Marchmont quite unable to scold Cesira after all that she had heard.

Poor Cesira! She was a handsome, black-browed gipsy of a woman, looking much younger than her years, with her full red lips and large dark eyes and finely developed figure. There was a look of sadness in her face, however, a

touch of tragedy in the heavy brows, and tears lay very near her flashing eyes, as Cecily soon discovered, when a few kindly words brought the story from her own mouth. 'Ah, yes,' she said, 'life was full of misery—the good God had taken all her children, and she was alone—alone, but what would you?—at any rate, life was short,' and she shook her head mournfully, wiped her eyes with her apron, and was silent; then seeing a little coloured print of Botticelli's loveliest Madonna and Child upon the table, she hastily caught it up and covered it with kisses. 'Il Bambino! Il caro Bambino!' she cried, and in an instant the tragic face was all aglow with smiles.

Yet she must have felt deeply, although her smiles came so easily, for

sometimes Cecily would come upon her, sitting in the embrasure of a window which looked towards Florence—Florence gleaming in the valley, twenty miles away—with a look of patient sadness which was more pathetic than her tears. The weary weight of this unintelligible world lay upon the unlearned peasant woman as heavily as upon Cecily herself. But it sometimes seemed to Cecily that if she had as unquestioning a faith as Cesira in the Unseen she would not take her grief so heavily.

Sitting out on the steps before her sitting-room window she mused on the difference between human lives and the natural world in which one and all were passed. The day was peculiarly beautiful. The morning mists had melted away and left absolute sunny

clearness behind, hill and vale lying out like a map in the sunshine, with lovely purple shadows on the mountain sides, shadows warm and velvety, like the bloom on a purple plum. In the little plain between the hills lay Florence, rose-red in the morning sun. But even more beautiful than that well-beloved and well-remembered city were the blue glooms and ethereal palenesses of those distant hills. To some eyes there is nothing more exquisite in nature than the bare flank of a mountain side, with its curving shadows between those golden-grey tracts that speak of granite foundations starting into view; the white lines of untrodden tracks and snow-fed torrents; the black patches of woodland, the faint green of grassy slopes merging into summits faintly blue, below which the

shadows look so thick and deep that you would imagine it possible to lay hold of them. The beauty of it riveted Cecily's eyes; but her mind was busy with things that were far away.

She had hitherto resolutely banished the difficulties of her own life, but she knew that the time had almost come when they would have to be faced. Her conversation with Cesira renewed a shuddering conviction of this. Yet everything in her mind as yet seemed hazy, as though enveloped in some mysterious manner by the golden mist that hangs about the mountain sides; and it was with labour and pain that she turned her thoughts to a past which gave her no pleasure to contemplate.

Looking at her face, one would scarcely have thought that she had known suffer-

ing, for its main characteristic was serenity. The soft grey eyes were serious, but not sad; the dreaminess of her moods had crept into their expression and given them a faintly wistful look. Her features were delicately cut, refined, without much trace of colour; not beautiful in themselves, yet forming part of a singularly attractive face. Her dark hair waved slightly on each side of a low broad forehead, across which the line of her eyebrows was almost level — a fact which probably accounted for the calmness of her expression. Women with arched, mobile eyebrows seldom give the impression of serenity.

She was tall, slender, graceful; and she dressed with scrupulous care, though with plainness, which exposed her to the charge of affectation. Never was a charge



less deserved. She liked simplicity and she liked grace, and her untrimmed trailing dresses, with the ruffle of fine lace at neck and wrists, happened to suit her to perfection. In England she had been forced sometimes to please the taste of another by decking herself out with jewels and trappings of all kinds, but in Italy she pleased her own and made herself thereby a pattern of good dressing in the eyes of the artists whom she met in Florence.

Those old days in England seemed very far away. She had had five years of married life, succeeding a happy girlhood which her mother's death had suddenly cut short. It had been in the lonely, mournful days after the death of her mother that Anthony Marchmont had asked her to marry him. She had

consented, somewhat languidly, in part because she felt herself so much alone in the world, and in part because her suitor seemed so madly in love with her. She had fancied that his love would compel her own as time went by. But, instead of compelling hers, it had waned from day to day, leaving behind it a sense of loss and injury which even to herself seemed strange. Why, she sometimes asked, should she care that he had ceased to love her? Why should she feel hurt, sore, angry, when she found that he was not only unloving, but unfaithful? Some knowledge of his life came to her ears once and made her bitterly indignant. He was a bad man, worthless, false, untrustworthy, and she would have nothing more to do with him. He had

been cruel to her in many ways, although he had never actually lifted his hand against her. But there had been enough unhappiness to justify her in resolving to leave his house. They had no children to bind them one to another: they had few relations to intervene with pleas for reconciliation and peace. And, being agreed on the subject, they did not call upon the law to separate them, but parted quickly, with civil good wishes for each other's welfare, and a determination, on Cecily's side, never to see her husband's face again.

But she did not put this determination into words. And perhaps Anthony Marchmont felt a little differently about it. He let her go without any protest, allowed her an ample income, and hoped that she would enjoy herself when she

said that she intended to visit Italy. But at the last moment he had added a word that recurred to her mind with disquieting significance:—‘We shall meet in summer, if not in the spring.’

She had passed it over at the time, but now that spring was merging into summer, she began to wonder what he meant. The obvious import of his words, she thought, was that he also intended to visit Italy in the spring; perhaps he would even come to Florence, doing Monte Carlo on the way. He was fond of Monte Carlo, as she had previously known—to her cost. She hoped that he did not mean to come. She had grown a little nervous during the latter part of her stay in the Lily City, lest she should come upon him unexpectedly at some turn in the street, some inner

chamber of the galleries, some chapel painted by a master's hand. It would be awkward for her, for few people at Florence knew that her husband was living. The one person to whom she had brought an introduction, and who had introduced her to the whole of the Anglo-Florentine society, had known her family but slightly, and had taken up an idea that Cecily was a widow. Cecily did not trouble to contradict her. Later on she was sorry she had not done so; but it was too late.

He had not come. Then—did he expect her to return to him? That was the question which agitated her now. To herself she said that she could not go back. She remembered the dreariness of the days of old, the long hours of loneliness, the fear of displeasure, the

smart of cutting words, the infinite scorn and despair with which she had regarded her husband and her life, and she shrank with indescribable loathing from the thought of it. These were things which she could never face again. She could never forgive her husband for the wrong that he had done her, never attempt again to keep the peace and turn a brave front to the world. She had only done it in her ignorance, she said to herself. She had only done it because she did not know what happiness meant, or peace, or enjoyment, or—love. And now she knew.

Peace—enjoyment: these were easy words. They had come to her with a new meaning at Florence. Her life, her whole soul, must henceforth be the sweeter because of the new draught of joy that had run like quicksilver through her veins.

But—love! How had she learnt anything of love, and who had taught her the lesson?

She would not answer this question fairly and squarely. She put it aside; she had been mistaken in bringing the word into her sum-total of calculations. She knew nothing of love. Only she had felt the presence of a personality which had impressed itself on her to a curious extent. She had known what it was to be looked at a good deal in a new way by a pair of penetrating, yet very reverent and adoring, eyes; she had listened for the accents of a voice which softened when it spoke to her as no voice, she thought, had ever softened before. It had been a dangerous moment when at last she tore herself away from Florence, and left behind the man who had such power to move her, and of whom she

involuntarily thought when she named the name of love.

Oh, no! although she loved no one else, she could not go back to Anthony Marchmont, now that she knew what love was like when it looked at her out of the eyes of another man.

As she sat and pondered thus, she saw two little figures moving through the tall grass of the neglected lawns on the plateau before the house, and looking up, she saw two small girl children in cotton frocks and flapping hats making their way into the enclosure. Already she knew them by sight: they were the gardener's children, who loved to steal into the garden, and pluck the wild flowers growing among the tall grasses and weeds which filled the box-edged squares. Dandelion-clocks they found in abundance, and



buttercups and campion and starwort, perhaps; and possibly they looked for *grilli*, which were always to be heard creaking amongst the herbage. They were sweet little creatures, fair and blue-eyed. One of them had long golden curls, and held her sister very tightly by the hand. Mrs Marchmont was glad to see them, for they turned the current of her thoughts. She called to them, but they looked almost too frightened to approach, and it was not until she held out the bait of some bon-bons that they ventured to creep a little nearer and take the crisp sweet things from her hand. Cecily thought that they had probably been warned to keep out of the way of visitors.

She was glad to change the current of thoughts that seemed to her uselessly

painful and provocative of doubt. She turned once more to the contemplation of the lovely purple shadows on the hills, the flash of light from Florentine domes and windows in the valley, the long green pastures near at hand; but for all that she was conscious—and in spite of herself—that a problem had been set her which she was bound to solve, here in the forest-glades of Vallombrosa,

‘Where the Etrurian shades  
High over-arched, embower.’

## II

*'But be thou of good cheer, for they are of God's kindred  
whom holy nature leadeth onward, and in due order showeth  
them all things.'*

The Golden Verses of Hierocles.

WHEN she was tired of her own thoughts she went for long, lonely rambles in the woods, or across the broom and heather-covered hills that stretched far away beyond Saltino. She could have had companions if she chose. Now and then there were other persons in the house: a party of genial Americans, a talkative Russian countess of unknown age and miraculous activity, an ambassador from one of the smaller states, with his French-speaking wife and children and governess. But these were passing

visitors who stayed for a few days at most, and disappeared almost as soon as she had grown accustomed to their faces. They met at meals, and, as a rule, that was all. At meals she talked to her neighbours pleasantly enough, and found pleasure in their society; but she had no distaste for her own, and was not often regretful when they went away. The parties from Florence, chiefly of Italians or Germans, who came by the morning train and went away at night, did not affect her at all, except when they brought their loud voices and smart toilettes into the garden, intercepting her view of the Arno Valley and scattering the silence of the hills.

On one of these occasions, filled with a vague irritation, she put on her hat and went out of the house altogether.



taking the downward road which led to Vallombrosa. She had not yet seen as much of the convent church as she desired to see, and this warm, sunny day was a good time for it. She stepped out of the garden gate, passing along a path, bordered on one side by a grassy space curving downwards to the wooded slopes of the valley, on the other by rising ground half covered with beech and oak-trees. The grassy space was just blossoming into beauty, the wind-flowers and violets had gone, but the starwort and strawberry were in blossom, the pink campion and ragged saxifrage were coming into flower, and a golden sheet of buttercups was in view. She noted the Star of Bethlehem afterwards about the 6th of June; pansies and buttercups were in their glory on the 13th. What struck her especially

was the almost violent rapidity with which the flowers succeeded each other: how, at a moment's notice, as it seemed, the June sun brought to light whole tracts of blue forget-me-nots, beds of brilliant pink campion and saxifrage, fields of golden buttercups, lakes of purple orchis and oases of snowy starwort—not one flower here and there, as in our soberer England, but everywhere, with lavish profusion, as if Nature did not know how to make response enough to the sunshine which shone so warmly and joyously upon the fertile land. A little later on came slender white flowers, something like meadow-sweet, tall lupins, and great tufts of Canterbury bells. The cuckoo-flower reminded Cecily of an English spring, and she was pleased, as if by the recognition of an old friend, when she found that all

the streams and tiny waterfalls were thickly fringed with Solomon's Seal. The time of roses and honeysuckle was not yet: these were the blossoms of spring, not widely different in kind from those that we see in our own meadows, but taller, more brilliant, more thickly clustered than an English climate will allow.

Across the tangle of grass and flowers Cecily looked at the sunlit hills, melting in the haze of light which obscured their outlines at this time of day. The sun was so strong that she was glad to enter the pine wood which stretched on either side of the road for some little way. Here the air was cool, almost cold, and now that the wind-flowers which loved the shade were gone, there were no blossoms peering through the carpet of fir-needles and fern. Beyond the pines

there were thickets of a more open and sunny kind, where beech trees grew, and where masses of wild flowers were once more to be seen, with here and there a purling brook, singing in three keys at once as it leaped from stone to stone on its way to the valley. Here the forget-me-nots grew thickest, and the buttercups shone like gold, and one could walk on moss-grown paths between the trees instead of keeping to the road, until the woodland ceased and the great green pastures skirting the convent walls were reached, and a new *genre* of beauty discovered itself.

For, as Cecily said to herself, never had she seen meadows like these meadows on either side of the still descending road. She had always kept a vague memory of fields, yellow with kingcups and buttercups, which she had traversed



in her childhood. Never since had flowers seemed to her so splendid, or grass so green. But the Vallombrosan meadows restored to her the dreams of her youth: they were the Eden of her infancy, the Elysian fields she had never hoped to win. Meadows they were such as are seen in Fra Angelico's pictures, where the green grass is enamelled with flowers of every hue — snowy white, pink, purple, blue, with here and there a glory of living gold. Surely the angelical painter had dreamed away the hours in fields like these before he planted the feet of his blessed saints upon such fair expanse of flower-bejewelled meads.

Alas, that, after these meadows of Paradise, the valley should be spoiled by a cluster of mean-looking houses crowding up to the high white walls of the mon-

astery! Hotels they are for the most part, with high - sounding names: Villa Medici and the Croce di Savoia, as well as half - a - dozen other *Alberghi* and *Trattorie* of the smaller type. These, half - finished, or under repair, or sadly needing repair, are built at various angles on the rocky slopes which find their centre in the plateau on which the old convent stands; and, behind convent and mean houses alike, rise the pine and beech - covered hills, towering high, and covered to the very summit with those embowering shades recalled by Milton when writing of the rebel host — of whom, perhaps, he dreamed when he himself trod the leafy glades of Vallombrosa. High up, above the convent tower, almost hidden among the trees, stands the square, white building known as

*Paradiso*, used for a hotel nowadays, but marking the vicinity of the hermits' cells where, people tell you, the great singer sojourned for a time — looking often, we cannot doubt, over the plain to the Lily City and to the Star-Tower of Galileo, his friend, and noting those infinite changes of sun and shade, of light and colour, which lingered in his mind, perhaps, when he described the ambrosial meads of that lost Paradise.

From a little distance, the monastery buildings are more imposing than beautiful. At first you see chiefly the wide circumference of the high stone wall that surrounds it, and, above the wall, a long, white, barrack-like erection, with very modern-looking green shutters to the windows of what were formerly the monks' cells; while, above this building again,

rises the clock-tower of the church, itself the central point of the edifice. Cecily was disappointed when she came upon it first. The desecrating hand of modern Italy had done its best to rob the whole place of its charm. But there is a fragrance in the records of past piety and devotion which cannot be entirely banished even by an infidel democracy, rampant at its will.

Cecily made her way over the rough, uneven stones which paved the way to the gateway in the wall. Some labourers were working at the unfinished, raw-looking hotel; the sound of hammer and axe fell sharply on the quiet air; the shrill tones of women gossiping with their neighbours came from door and window of the little yellow houses, where a scrap of red curtain or blue drapery gave the

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only touch of brightness to their squalid exterior. By the high stone archway a few idlers lounged on benches placed on either side. A long, white road, beautifully kept and walled with stone, unrolled itself like a broad ribbon from the gate of the monastery, across hill and dale, between wooded hill and grassy glade, until it was lost in the blue distance; and one remembered that it was the road to Florence — and the world. A square, paved fish-pond lay beside the roadway, just beyond the gate. The water looked green and unwholesome in the sunlight, but from a little distance came the refreshing sound of running streams—the Vallombrosan torrents leaping from the heights to the vale below. With the sound of water in her ears like a strain of music, which seemed to spiritualise all the

environment, Cecily passed through the gateway into the paved courtyard.

The flagged path lay straight before her to the arched entrance-way, with its worn stone steps, which led through the monastery to the church. She stood and gazed at the long white building, severely plain for the most part, but with carved work in stone over the principal windows and doorways. Here, then, the Vallombrosan monks had lived and worked and prayed. What is left of them now? A venerable pile of buildings, turned to public uses, converted by the State into an Institute of Forestry, where fifty or sixty madcap youths make the old corridors re-echo with their clanking footsteps and their unbridled mirth, where science is taught instead of theology, and the old refectory is turned into

a theatre for the performances of heedless lads in their play hours! The old order giveth place to the new, here at Vallombrosa as certainly as in Paris or London, and God fulfils himself in many ways.

The Vallombrosa post office occupies one end of the building. From the great entrance which is not opposite the gateway, but, near the post-office end, Cecily noted the students in their dark uniforms coming and going, giving her, as they passed her on the paved way before the building, the frank, open, but not impertinent stare which is characteristic of all Italians when they pass a pretty woman. Cecily had grown tolerably well accustomed to it, but in some ways it jarred on her when she was about to enter the church, and she passed quickly through the dark vaulted

opening into the small inner court, partly covered over, which led to the church door.

Here all was silence and loneliness. Not even the pleasant-faced custodian, usually so ready with his proffers of service, was to be seen. She could puzzle out the Latin inscriptions relative to the founding of the church on the tablets by the door at her leisure, and then she could push aside the heavy leather curtain, enter the church and explore it at her will. Sometimes there was a silent worshipper, sometimes not. Every morning, as she knew, Mass was said by one of the two priests who were left to perform the service of the church. All the other members of the order, once so powerful, had been dispersed, were gathered into other communities, or, per-



haps, had even returned to the world. The two priests were allowed to celebrate their rites, to hold a little school for the village boys, to have rooms adjoining the church, but their beloved monastery was non-existent, its lofty rooms and echoing corridors were given over to scientific young Italy, and the place of the 'pious founder' knew him no more. Cecily saw the priests sometimes in her walks about Vallombrosa, and felt sorry for them: they had kindly, rather melancholy faces. One of them was almost always accompanied by a boy or two, round whose neck his arm would be affectionately placed, as if they—scholars, probably, acolytes and servers at the altar—had become to their spiritual father the very heart and core of his interests and affections.

The church at Vallombrosa is not beautiful. Its proportions are good, but its decorations are poor and tawdry, the ornaments gaudy, yet of curious shabbiness, the pictures bad. The side-altars are laden with vases of hideous artificial flowers, an insult to the beauties of the fields without; only at the Virgin's shrine did Cecily notice, with a contraction of the heart, a poor, shabby, little bunch of real flowers—white lilac and daisies and campion, which somebody had stuck sideways in a common mug and left upon the altar. Whose heart, she wondered, had been prompted to bring the wild flowers of the field to the Madonna?—lowly offerings to her who was meek and lowly of heart!—a fitting gift.

But the large, dim, bare church, with the damp oozing between its stones, did

not tempt her to stay, although she found afterwards that it lingered in her memory with an impressive significance, longer than some of the greater and grander churches that she had seen. She generally passed through it quickly on her way to a chapel on the north side of the altar, the chapel of the founder, San Giovanni Gualberto. It was in this place that she loved to linger, to dream, perhaps to pray.

She had read, as everyone has read, the romance of *John Inglesant*, and bore an especial love for that scene in which the hero, in his shining armour, riding up the narrow mountain path, meets the murderer of his brother, and, conquered by his cry for mercy in Christ's name, leads him to the altar of a little chapel where, after the celebration of the Mass,

he leaves his jewelled, glittering sword in token of the vengeance that he has laid down at the foot of the Cross. It had been one of her favourite chapters. It seemed to her as if she had seen the splendid cortège of the Cavaliere di San Giorgio winding up the hill in the dewy freshness of the morning, had heard the wretched criminal plead for pity, and had knelt with Inglesant to receive the Blessed Sacrament, and heard him deliver his enemy into the hands of God. It had always seemed very beautiful and very true to her; and she had been pleased and somewhat touched to find that almost the same story is told of a real man, of John Gualberto—San Giovanni Gualberto—the Florentine gallant, who became the first hermit and founder of an order of monks in the solitudes of

Vallombrosa, as the old prayers and documents have it — '*nelle solitudini di Vallombrosa.*'

Perhaps Shorthouse had drawn his inspiration from that story, so well-known in Florence and its vicinity; certainly Mrs Marchmont never forgot it, told, as it was, to her on the way to San Miniato, near the very spot where Gualberto is said to have met his enemy. Except for the beauty of Shorthouse's descriptions, she liked the true story (or at least the story of the real man) better than that of John Inglesant; it seemed to her more naïve, more passionate, with an apposite and logical conclusion which was wanting to the tale of the Jesuit's favourite pupil. It was less modern, certainly, and she liked the flavour of mediævalism—of the ages of faith.

For Ser Giovanni Gualberto had been a true Florentine, a gay, generous, noble youth, with a sort of natural splendour about him which shines through the whole of his story, whether told by monkish chroniclers or the unbelieving historiographer of our day. And his brother, whom he loved, was like him, proud, most likely careless, full of the joy of life, until he was cut off in his prime by an assassin's hand. Whereupon Giovanni, filled with rage, swore to do justice on the murderer of his brother, and to kill him without mercy whenever and wherever they should meet. One imagines the generous ardour of the young noble, his fierce indignation, his grief for the brother whom he has loved, and one is inclined to sympathise with him in his desire for

vengeance on the man who struck the traitorous blow.

And so the time of Easter approaches; and on Good Friday morning, early in the day—

Stop for a moment, and picture to yourself the lovely spring morning, loveliest of all times in Italy, with the dew still lying on the asphodel in the meadows, and bowing the rosy peach-blossom-branches to the ground, the sun rising over the city, touching the red roofs and domes with burning light, and turning the yellow Arno into a river of gold, gilding even the tops of the black cypresses which stand like sentinels about the churches, and casting long lines of radiance across the grey olives on the hills—picture to yourself again the gay young nobleman and his brilliant train winding up the steep ascent

now crowned by the church of San Miniato ; the sound of the cool morning breeze in the pines, broken by the tramp of their horses' feet. Whither were they going, that little troop of horsemen, I wonder, winding out into the open country on the day that our Saviour died? Sometimes I think that Gualberto wanted to get away from the sacred associations of the season: that he was leaving behind him the solemn churches of the city, because his heart was full of hatred against his brother's murderer. At any-rate, he was riding in the early morning of Good Friday, as the story says, up towards San Miniato, when there, at the sharp bend in the road, appeared the figure of the man he sought—his enemy.

There was no escape for the poor wretch, whom probably all the party knew



and execrated. Gualberto's eyes must have glowed, his brow must have lowered at the thought of the vengeance he was about to execute. And then the murderer, falling on his knees, and stretching out his arms in the form of a cross, reminded the brilliant young Cavaliere that on this day the Lord Jesus was crucified, and for Christ's sake he begged Gualberto to have mercy upon him.

Can we nowadays measure the force of that appeal? The gay young gallant, the handsome cavalier, the proud avenger of a brother's blood, has in his heart a profound belief in Christ crucified, and not only crucified, but alive for evermore. The words strike to the inmost core of his being. For the sake of that bleeding, dying figure upon the cross, he cannot lift his hand against a man for whom

Christ also died. Nay, he must love him, were he ten times a murderer; and loving, he must forgive.

So, as the story goes, he takes his enemy by the hand and leads him to the altar of a little wayside church, where, before the rude wooden crucifix, he gives up his vengeance for evermore. And, so far, the story is almost the story of Short-house's hero, John Inglesant.

But here we part company with modern versions. For as Giovanni Gualberto knelt before the crucifix with eyes streaming, perhaps, and heart broken in the very extremity of self-sacrifice, we are told that the pale figure on the crucifix inclined its thorn-crowned head towards him, and that the patient face smiled approval of the gracious act. What if the story be but legend? Call it a parable, rather; for an

act of such divine compassion and forgiveness must surely have had its recompense in Divine approval, whether shown by sign or not.

At anyrate, according to the story, the figure on the great wooden crucifix bowed its head, and Gualberto was so deeply moved by this token of Divine favour that he thereupon gave up the world and became a hermit at San Miniato, and later on at Vallombrosa, where he became the founder of an order of monks, known as Vallombrosani. Here he lived for many years in growing sanctity, with his community growing up around him; here he worked miracles, cured the sick, exorcised demons, became the protector of the sick and dying. They still show an old beech tree in the neighbourhood under which he used to pray. But what

became of the murderer whom he forgave, the story does not say. It would be interesting to know what happened to him.

There seemed to Cecily a stamp of reality on the very face of the story—something wonderfully human about it, when divested of the miraculous element. To her the real miracle, as Howells has somewhere said, consisted in the man's change of heart, the forgiveness of a mortal injury, the turning from darkness to light. And then there is the vivid interest, the dramatic force of the story. No hesitations, no half measures. First, the fine, gallant, young noble, with his clanking spurs, his feathered velvet cap, his gay mantle, his flashing sword—ever ready to avenge an insult, to wipe out by blood the memory of a wrong—with his crowd of friends and attendants, all

like minded, all gay, careless, hot tempered, perhaps even a little insolent; then the change — the thunderbolt — the transformation of the mediæval noble into the equally mediæval monk, into the rapt hermit, the impassioned saint. Was not this a miracle indeed, like the conversion of Saint Paul? For to change the heart of a man, to make the avenger of blood forgive his enemy, the worldling to choose heaven rather than earth, is no easy matter, and defies any power which is not of God to achieve.

Thinking of these things Cecily passed to the left of the grand altar and entered one of the chapels on the north transept, the chapel of San Giovanni Gualberto, the hero of the legend. It was a pity, she reflected, that the great wooden crucifix had not been brought here; but

it seems that, after a long sojourn at San Miniato, it was taken to the Trinità in Florence, where it now remains. Cecily had already tried to see it and been unsuccessful; the church of the Trinità had been closed for repairs when she was in Florence. She was obliged to content herself with the traditions of the place, and the curious feeling of nearness to the past that they inspired.

The little chapel was wonderfully still. An old woman knelt in the chapel opposite, where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, but the shrine of San Giovanni Gualberto was deserted. There was certainly not much accommodation for worshippers, unless they stood or knelt: two chairs, each in front of a prayer-desk, were the only seats in the chapel. Cecily sat down on one of them, and looked about her. There

was an attempt at elaborate decoration which, although well meant, was not pleasing. The high, vaulted ceiling was an ornate mosaic of white upon gold, and at each corner of the building stood singularly bad female figures in marble, representing Faith, Hope, Charity and Penitence. The altar, somewhat meanly adorned, stood well out from the wall, in which a tablet had been let, commemorating the virtues of Gualberto, who lies buried here. And above the tablet hangs a large picture, which Cecily studied with attention. Here Gualberto is represented in his hermit dress, praying under the sacred beech tree, which the people still point out, while Christ leans towards him from a crucifix. Cecily wondered whether the face and figure of Gualberto were life-like, and thought it at least possible. It

is a face of great energy and vigour: the brown beard, the dark eyes and intense expression, look as if they had been taken from life, while the sword and cross which he is usually represented as grasping, indicate the war-like nature of the man as well as his fervour and devotion. A lamp burns near the altar, and there are two or three paintings on the walls, and between them cupboard doors, ornamented with gilded wooden ornamentations; the cupboards themselves containing bones and other relics of the faithful.

The sound of falling waters came to Cecily's ears as she sat upon her solitary chair. The Vallombrosan torrents were pouring down from the heights as they had done when Giovanni Gualberto himself sought the solitary spot. The continuous chime of the waterfalls had been



in his ears and in the ears of his monks as they were in Cecily's now. They had said their prayers to the accompaniment of that musical monotone. Had it soothed their fiery hearts and calmed their spirits in the days of old? It seemed to Cecily that she would never lose the impression of this quiet Gualberto chapel, near which the hermit, the man of war, the fiery Florentine noble, had once lived, hearing the sound of the falling waters and the note of wild birds, even as she heard them now. What did they suggest to him? she wondered. Down in fair Florence all the sheen and splendour of a worldly life was going on: its continual stir, its excitements, its pleasure must sometimes have recurred to his mind, while he lived here in solitude, with the sound of rustling green trees and falling waters and birds' songs about him,

and wrestled with God, for what?—for his own soul? I think not, surely, but for the souls of those in ignorance, in sin, in blindness of heart, as he himself had been; and also especially for the souls of the dying—perhaps for the sake of that dearly beloved brother who had been done to sudden death by the hand of that murderer whom the saint forgave.

A framed and glazed sheet of printed matter lay on the prayer-desk before her. As she could not easily see it from her chair, she knelt on the fald-stool before her, and read the words as they were meant to be read—kneeling. The frame was of dark brown wood, almost black with age; the paper was yellow, and the printing old-fashioned. At the top of the page there was an antiquated-looking print of Gualberto himself—a half-length—showing

him with bearded face, eager eyes, lips half apart, as in the picture, a halo—very much like a straw hat—round his head, a sword and a cross in either hand. This picture represented ‘S. Joan Gualbertus, Abbas Congreg. Vallis - Umbrosae Institutor, Agonizzantium Protector.’

‘Protector of the dying.’ She read on with interest. The prayer which followed had to her ears a curiously melodious ring:—

PREGHIERA

A SAN GIO. GUALBERTO,

INSTITUTORE DEI VALLOMBROSANI

*‘Per ottenere la grazia di cristianamente vivere, e santamente morire.*

*‘O glorioso S. Gio. Gualberto,’* ran the words, *‘voi che chiamato da Gesù pendente nella Croce, lasciate il mondo, e vi deste tutto a lui nelle solitudini di Vallombrosa,*

*ottenetemi la grazia, che io porti volentieri quella Croce che il mio e vostro Dio avrà determinato che porti.'*

'That I may willingly bear that Cross which my God and yours has decreed that I should bear.' Could any expression of submission to the Will of God rise higher? She paused a little on the words.

This was the first prayer. There were others, seven in all, each to be followed by a *Pater* and an *Ave*. The next five rehearsed the miracles performed by Gualberto, with an appropriate prayer derived from each: they were records of his casting out the devil, curing the sick, aiding those who were at the point of death, records all of kindly, pious deeds, through which shone the generous, lovely nature of the man, marked by a peculiar

loftiness of sentiment and a singular capacity for single-hearted devotion.

The seventh prayer was followed by a versicle and a response :—

*‘ Voi che adesso in Cielo godete il premio delle sante virtù da voi esercitate in questa vita, fate per pietà, Sante Padre, che io dietro le vestigia di quelle correndo, giunga a godere il sommo Bene in vostra compagnia in Paradiso. Gloria, Pater, Ave.*

*‘ V. Per i meriti ed intercessioni di San Gio. Gualberto.*

*‘ R. Abbiate, Signore, misericordia di noi nel punto della nostra morte.’*

Renunciation, pain, sorrow, even to the point of death! She laid down the framed prayers with a sigh. To her there seemed something terrible in this surrender of the good things, the beautiful things of this world, the glad surrender of life

itself. Yet, doubtless, to Gualberto in his cell on the mountain side, within hearing of that never-ceasing lapping of water over the stones, and the murmur of the wind among the pines, sounds of all sounds the most soothing, the most consoling,—here, doubtless, Gualberto had found peace.

III

*'Let others wrangle, I will wonder.'*

SAINT AUGUSTINE.

'BUT there is no religion now, Signora. No, it is all done away with, by order of the Government,' says Pietro.

Pietro is the accredited guide of the neighbourhood, and shows his dignity by a faded red band round his cap and a long stick in his hand. For the rest, his appearance is not very prepossessing. His coat is green with age, his other garments are patched beyond belief. He looks as if he had dressed himself in the fragments, roughly pieced together, of other people's clothes; as if he par-

took of the earth, from the clods of which he and his vesture alike had been derived. He was said to be very poor, wretchedly poor, living only on what he could get from visitors during the short summer season, and ready not only to act as guide, but to do all sorts of errands and commissions: to buy spirits of wine for you at the *fiascheria*, to get your shoes mended, to run here and there and everywhere for a few centimes, and to be amiable and grateful and talkative through it all. Before long you come to like his patient, toil-lined face and anxious, pathetically-friendly eyes, and to take pleasure in his fluent histories of the places and the people around.

‘But there is still the church, Pietro!’

‘Signora!—there is the church, as you say; but there used once to be the



monastery also ; and the brothers, they were very good to the poor and taught the children and planted trees — oh, millions of trees ! But now—*altro !* The Government has sent the monks away, and only a few women and old people go to the Mass, and there is no more religion in the country.'

'There are two priests left, I see.'

'Signora !—as you say, there are two priests left for the service of the church. They have rooms in the monastery still. And they teach the boys of the village every morning, but there is not much for them to do.'

'And the girls ?' Cecily asked at this point, half smiling.

'Signora !—nobody teaches the girls. Their mothers teach them all that it is necessary for girls to know.'

Fortunately there are not many girls, or children of any kind, in Vallombrosa or Saltino. But in the scattered homesteads of the district there must surely be children growing up to manhood and womanhood? Cecily thought of the fair-haired little girls whom she had seen in the garden and took an opportunity of questioning their bright-faced mother, the gardener's wife.

'Signora'—the invariable polite prefix to a communication—'Signora, it is true. There are no schools for the girls here. I have to teach mine the little that I know myself, but it is not very much. The Fathers at the church—oh, yes, they teach the boys.'

And taught them successfully, Cecily fancied, as she met one or other of the priests with his arm laid affec-

tionately round the neck, or his hand on the shoulder, of his scholars; and although she never achieved a nearer acquaintance than was involved in a bow on her part, and a respectful '*Buon giorno, Signora,*' on the other side, she gathered an idea that the two priests—still young and somewhat melancholy-looking—were pious and kindly men.

'But there is no religion left in the country,' Pietro said regretfully. 'There may be some in the towns, but here—the Government has done away with all the religion. We have Mass on Sundays, oh, yes, Signora, but things are very much changed.'

Cecily inquired the hour of Mass. There was always one at nine o'clock, and on Sundays, she was told, there were one or two at earlier hours; but nine

o'clock was the usual time. She resolved to go on the following day, and judge for herself whether Pietro's opinions were correct.

'The Signora will not go for a beautiful walk among the mountains?' Pietro said, with a wistful look. But Cecily was distrustful of the weather, and, moreover, she liked to walk alone, so she dismissed Pietro with a smile and a present which sent him away well content.

The weather had changed indeed. There had been heavy rain and driving mist nearly all day long. Great wreaths of mist rose up bodily like enormous spectral forms from the valley, sweeping across the terrace on which the house was built, drifting up over the hill behind it, so that in two or three minutes the whole view would be blotted out, and nothing but a dense wall of fog visible from the

windowpanes. It was so cold and dreary that Mrs Marchmont ordered a fire, and sat beside the crackling logs until late in the afternoon. Then she looked out of the window, and, lo!—a gleam of light, a sort of flame in the heavens, a red glow in the west, and the rain had ceased. The clouds seemed to roll back from the point where the sun was setting, their heavy masses glowing red and purple as they receded, showing the clear yellow glow behind. It was a veritable transformation scene ; a wonderful feast of colour after the greyness of the day.

At night, when she looked out, the air was perfectly clear. The moon rode high in the naked heavens ; the stars seemed unusually large and bright. The Great Bear lay almost overhead, so high that she had to crane her head

back to see it. Above and around her everything was clear.

But below, far down in the valley of the Arno, the fog lay in a great white pall, thick and fleecy as snow, like an impenetrable blanket, that one could touch and feel, spread out over field and hill. Cecily thought, with some pleasure, of her height above the valley mists, then, by a sudden transition, she remembered Gualberto and his hermit cell, high above the bewildering mists and mirages of that world low down from which he had escaped. Was he, too, glad to be out of the fog?

Next morning there was the usual sunny clearness of atmosphere, in which even the shadows were beautiful. Florence stood out in soft red tints, with sparkles of light here and there; Cecily had seldom seen

it so distinctly. She was up and breakfasting somewhat earlier than usual. It was a good fifteen minutes' leisurely walk to Vallombrosa, and the chief Mass of the day would begin at nine o'clock. She set off soon after half-past eight, finding the sun hot in the unshaded portions of the road, and glad to loiter a little beneath the overarching trees as soon as she reached them.

On her way she was overtaken by several parties of people, evidently families and friends from Saltino, or more outlying homesteads of the district. It did not look to her as if religion were quite so extinct as Pietro had averred—to judge, at least, by the number of people walking down to Vallombrosa while the morning light was still upon the hills. There were men and their wives and children, and

numbers of young girls, for whom it was evidently a gala day. The men sometimes carried the smaller children. Cecily was struck by seeing one of them with a baby boy aloft upon his shoulders, to whom he was talking loudly and gaily as he went along the road. '*Io vado alla Messe—io, bambino!*' he was teaching the child to say, with evident pride. '*Io bambino, io!*' After him came some young women—young, bareheaded, their hair beautifully plaited, a silk handkerchief neatly folded across their shoulders, a prayer-book in their hands, and with them several children, mostly girls, generally bareheaded too, but dressed in their best frocks. The older women wore their gay silk handkerchiefs over their heads and knotted under their chins, but the younger ones exposed themselves fearlessly to the



glow of the sun. Cecily noted an exception; one girl had donned much more conventional attire than her fellows: she wore a grey frock, the bodice nearly covered with white lace, a straw hat trimmed with flowers, long grey gloves and silver bangles. She had perhaps been in some large town, and had learned town fashions, but she walked and chattered with her less bedecked companions in a simple way, which made Cecily hope that she was not yet spoilt. The other girls seemed proud of her finery, and stopped to rearrange her lace and her flowers when they came in sight of the church tower, with its great dial-plate and single gilt hand showing brightly in the sunshine.

It was about a quarter to nine, and, rather to Cecily's surprise, quite a troop of men and women—chiefly men—were

pouring out of the monastery gates. These had been present at the earlier Mass; and waiting about the gate, and in the paved spaces before it, were a good many others, including some of the students of the Institute of Forestry, into which the monastery has been turned. These young men were evidently waiting for a signal to march into church, where attendance at Mass on Sundays and feast days was part of their college drill, and Cecily saw them gathering about the doors in expectation of the bugle-call. They were dressed in a uniform which, though sober, was not unpleasing to the eye. It consisted of a black coat, with bright green velvet collar and cuffs and gilt buttons, and grey trousers with a green stripe. The young men varied in age: some were already bearded and bronzed, while others were

mere boys in appearance. Cecily wondered a little as she passed whether they came with any faith or reverence to the church of the monastery, which, surely, their presence was held to desecrate.

She passed into the church and seated herself on one of the front benches, of which there were some half-dozen on either side of the building near the door, leaving about half the church empty between the seats and the high altar. The benches were gradually filled with men, women and children—the men on the north side, the women on the south. A great bell began to ring overhead (Cecily could see the ringer toiling at his rope through a little open door), a bugle sounded outside, and in marched the Forestry students, who took up their positions, standing in single file on either

side of the church, with their faces to the altar. Here, in spite of the presence of a bearded man in authority, they kept up a low-toned conversation with each other through the greater part of the service, punched each other in the ribs, played (it was evident) practical jokes, and were never silent or serious, except at the rare moments when the professor's eye was upon them, or when the Elevation of the Host took place, at which time a fair amount of decorum obtained.

But the presence of this unruly section of 'young Italy' was disturbing to Cecily's attention. If these young men had been absent she would have enjoyed the service, with its homely adjuncts and absence of elaboration. The church was poor, the pictures on the walls were defaced and bad, the organ music was

deplorably trivial and incorrect; yet the two lights on the altar, the priest's deep tones, and the shrill response of his single acolyte, the tinkling bell, the momentary silence at the Sanctus and the Elevation, these had the everlasting power which the Catholic form of worship can always command, and Cecily found herself more in sympathy with the old crone kneeling on the marble steps of a side altar just before her, whose beads clicked in her trembling hand, and whose grey head in its yellow handkerchief was bent almost to the ground in her devotion, than with the scoffing youths who stood erect with folded arms or sidelong glances at their neighbours during the most solemn moments of the function, and whose attitude had probably produced in the minds of some simple peasants the con-

viction that there was now no more religion in the land of Italy.

These country folk had not lost their belief at any rate; there were rows of toil-worn labourers, faded old crones in bright silk handkerchiefs, children of all ages, bowing the knee to the altar of their faith; and, more than these, there were men and women, young and strong, who had come through the woods and over the hills that morning in the June sunlight to worship with their parents and their children at the Table of the Lord.

In about twenty minutes the Mass was said, the lights were put out, the college students tramped away into the sunshine, the village people followed, leaving behind some few only of the more devout, who stayed to make their confessions or to kneel in the chapel where the Sacrament

was reserved. Cecily also lingered a little, sitting for a while in Gualberto's chapel, where the noise of the torrent came gratefully to her ear after the dance music and operatic airs in which Italian church-organists seem to delight. She stayed so long that the sacristan, a pleasant-faced, clear-eyed man, came to ask her whether she would not like to see the relics that were preserved in the church. Mindful of the gilt cupboard doors in the chapels—doors which were inscribed with the words '*Ossa martyrum*'—and moved by some sort of curiosity, Cecily consented to inspect the relics, although a little afraid that she might hurt the poor sacristan's feelings by not evincing sufficient veneration for the objects that she was about to see.

But the pleasant-faced sacristan was

delighted to show his treasures, and not at all critical, apparently, of the attitude of his visitors. He produced a great bunch of keys and applied them, one after another, to the cupboard doors high up in the wall, all covered with designs in gilded wood like the cornices and mirrors of fifty years ago; and on the cupboard shelves he pointed out numberless glass cases, with tawdry gilt frames, displaying the bones of the martyrs, carefully, but somewhat inappropriately, adorned with artificial flowers. Interspersed with these were medallions framed in tinsel, with gilt rays projecting from a single tooth or a scrap of bone. Somebody's blood was kept in a sealed goblet; the ashes of another in a vase—a few white cinders, all that remained of some man who loved and toiled and suffered in his day.



‘The shrines were of silver once,’ says the sacristan in a melancholy voice; ‘but Napoleon came and took them away, so now they are of wood only—wood *argentato*.’

There are four cupboards of bones in San Giovanni Gualberto’s chapel, and in the chapel where the Holy Sacrament is reserved there are still more; for the great picture behind the altar slides away when the man touches certain springs and shows you bones—bones—bones, nothing but bones, the bones of ten martyrs, you are told, but how or when martyred, it is difficult to learn.

But under the high altar of the church is the greatest treasure of all; for here lies the whole body of Saint Florentius—‘in his harness as he lived,’ or, at least, in what is intended to represent it: a brown

mummied figure, with breastplate and greaves glittering with gold (or tinsel, is it not?), his helmet beside him, his head resting upon his hand on a red velvet cushion, as if he slept, a ghastly little goblet of his blood, as we are told, standing by. Although brown and withered, it remains a knightly figure, with a finely chiselled face, as of a man whose nobility of race and character could not be questioned, whomsoever he might turn out to be. But to Cecily there was something strange in thinking of this dead warrior-saint lying in his plain glass box, screened by a faded curtain and a painted board of wood from the eyes of worshippers who are surely so different from those which the church has seen in other days. Standing back from the altar, the guide points out to you the old windows

where once the abbot assisted at the solemn functions and the monks looked down upon a kneeling crowd. They are now merely the windows which open upon the Scuola di Disegno, the Scuola Botanica, where the young students of the present day are instructed in the art and science of our time. It is because these upper rooms are turned into places of secular study that the priests keep the Reserved Sacrament in the side chapel instead of on the high altar. It is a sort of desecration that these classes should be going on overhead—so, at least, Cecily was informed. She wondered whether these youths who had succeeded to the places of the monks were likely to be better men than they. Would they ever in their own way show the heroism of a Florentius, warrior-martyr, whose mortal remains lie

beneath the altar before which, on Sundays and feast days, they are marshalled, as on parade, to stand unwillingly, while the priest says solemn words to which they only half attend, and which they less than half believe? Would they emulate the nobility of Gualberto's nature, learning as the chief of their studies how to endure, to renounce and to forgive? These things they could do as Gualberto and Florentius did, without turning martyr or monk; but for these things no formula is sufficient, and each man must find out his own way. And herein lies the difference between the old world and the new.

Then Cecily was taken into the sacristy, where she saw more relics and portraits, but was more interested by the work of the sacristan—carved work in wood, with which he occupied himself in winter when

the nights were long. A beautiful little shrine roused her admiration, and she asked him its price; but he did not seem to wish to sell it, and she had to content herself with his smiling shake of the head. Then he took out of a box some little crosses, rudely fashioned from thin slices of soft unseasoned wood. They were made from wood, he said, cut from the sacred beech tree under which the holy Giovanni Gualberto used to pray. He pressed one upon his visitor, together with a piece of paper on which were printed the words of a prayer to the saint and a record of the tree from which the cross was taken; but he would take no money for it. The cross was given, he said, to all who came that way.

Back into the church they returned and there were still other cases of bones

and somewhat gruesome relics to inspect: the skin of one man, the brain of another, and, above all, the bones of Santa Filomena, for whom the sacristan entertained a high respect. And there Cecily took leave of him, offering him money for his services, and rather surprised to find that he took it with reluctance and only after some insistence on her part.

She walked back to the hotel slowly, dreaming over all that she had seen and heard. She reached it just in time to receive a visit from the two fair-haired children of the gardener, who arrived in white frocks and flapping Leghorn hats to do honour to the English lady by bringing her a great bouquet of flowers—garden flowers, not wild ones—causing Cecily to remember how she had heard

from a friend in Florence that the Italian mountain folk did not like to receive a present without giving something in return. She had presented the children with chocolate and other bonbons a few days before, and the flowers came as the mother's token of gratitude. It was a pretty habit, Cecily thought, and to be taken as another proof of the grace with which common actions can be endued. Like the posies of wild flowers which the servants left upon her sitting-room table, they were signs not only of good-will but of gracious feeling, and a sort of poetry which the middle-classes in Italy seem almost to have lost.

She sat on the terrace in the afternoon, basking in the sunshine, and not disposed to quarrel even with two parties of noisy Americans and Germans from Florence,

who were displaying their costumes in the garden to the edification of each other, and, presumably, of the crickets, for there was no one else to see. She had a volume of Browning open on her knee, but she did not read; she was thinking of the church in the valley, and contrasting its humble services with the functions which she had witnessed at the Annunziata, her favourite place of resort on Sunday mornings at Florence. This church had always charmed her—she scarcely knew why; perhaps because it was bound up in her mind with some historical memories; perhaps because she always fancied the meeting of Tito and Tessa in the crowd beside Our Lady's shrine; perhaps because she liked the warm smell of incense, the many-coloured figures from the village mingling with the



praying towns-folk, the unceasing flame of the tall candles in the great silver candlesticks. Our likings are made up of trifles. We cannot always tell why such and such a place is dear to us, or why another scene lingers with a sense of comfort in our minds; and with Cecily it happened that *La Nunziata*, as the Florentines affectionately call it, always brought to her a feeling of pleasure and refreshment not quite justified by facts. She liked the naïve devotion of the people, whose religion was so much a matter of course, so intermingled with the fabric of their common life that they thought no harm of gossiping with a neighbour at one moment and dropping on their knees at the sound of the sacring-bell the next. Cecily thought no harm either. She rather liked to see

two men passing from mundane things to the holiest mysteries without effort, like children, to whom religion is the same thing as mother-love; and it did not distress her as it distresses some people, to note a woman with a market basket intent upon her wares in the intervals between the telling of her beads. The incongruity was not painful to her; rather, it seemed to her, as if the Northern nations erred in putting too much distance between themselves and God.

There was greater decorum, she acknowledged, in the practices of the Northern race, but she was not sure that there was greater devotion. Still, she remembered a scene that had pleased her—a Low Mass in Cologne Cathedral, where the great nave was crowded with pious folk, standing or kneeling, who sang long, slow, musical

chorales to the accompaniment of the mighty organ, while the priest performed his functions quietly at the altar, and a flood of sunshine poured through the painted windows and lighted up the jewel-like patches of colour in quaint embroidery of stone. From hundreds of German throats had risen a wave of strong and tuneful melody, broad, masculine, harmonious—such singing as could come only from the hearts and lips of a faithful people who kept to the old German ways of praising God. It was perhaps a mightier emotion which thrilled Cecily Marchmont to the inmost fibre of her being when she heard that great hymn rising, filling the spaces, floating in the heights of the magnificent cathedral, than the one which possessed her in the Annunziata, where, indeed, she felt herself lifted far above

the sphere of earth, but where also the sensuous side of her was moved by the keen odour of incense and the hot notes of the violins.

She was still thinking of the Annunziata, with a certain tenderness and regret, when a letter was brought to her by Adriano, who explained that it had come by a later train than usual, after being probably detained at Florence. She had watched the ugly, little puffing train creeping up the hill from Pontassieve to Saltino, but had not thought that it would bring her anything of interest, least of all, a letter which was to be in some sort a messenger of fate.

She opened it languidly. It was from England; and she had not expected a letter from England, for she had few correspondents of any kind. When she

came to Italy she gave her address to no one except her lawyer and to one of the servants in her husband's house. He, Anthony, never asked for it. Of course he could get it from her solicitor whenever he chose, and it was not likely that he would wish to write to her. She sent him a post card once, to which she received no answer; it was the sole communication she had held with him since she left England. For a moment she had been afraid that the letter was from him, but a second glance at the handwriting on the envelope reassured her. It was from her lawyer, Mr Walrond: that was all.

Mr Walrond gave her some information about her money affairs—nothing of importance—but he did not break off his letter at that point, as was usual with

him. He went on to say two things which filled Cecily with surprise: first, that he had seen Mr Marchmont, and that Mr Marchmont had looked extremely unwell; secondly, he suggested that Mrs Marchmont should return to England and nurse her husband—an arrangement which he, Mr Walrond, was sure would be a great satisfaction to Mr Marchmont, who, however, he must confess, had not authorised him to say what he had said.

Cecily's calm was swept away. She was bitterly angry with Mr Walrond, whom she accused of meddling impertinently with her affairs.

‘If Anthony were ill—if Anthony wanted me back—he would have written to me himself, or deputed some one else to write. And it is the most unlikely thing in the world that he should wish to see me

again. As to being ill—why he is one of the strongest men I have ever known in my life; he is never ill even for a day. Mr Walrond has stepped out of his province altogether; he had no business to write to me in this way.'

And Cecily rose, with a hot flush on her face and a new light in her eyes, to write a curt note to Mr Walrond expressive of her dislike to the subject that he had broached and her desire that it should not be reopened. She did not put her feeling into plain words, and yet she made it very evident. 'My husband will write for me,' no doubt, when he wishes for my return,' she said, trying to be very dignified, so as to crush Mr Walrond and his impertinent suggestions. And then she sent off the letter, although she knew that it could not leave Saltino until the

morrow ; but she felt that she should be happier when it was gone.

Then she tried to settle down again with her book, but her delight in Browning and in the summer sky alike were gone. She could think of nothing but the old days ; the days when her husband had injured and insulted her, and she had hated him with a hate that was worse than death. Go back to him ! No ; not unless he was dying ; not unless he implored her on his knees to go back to him—not even then. She did not love him, and she was not one of those women who easily forgive.

Her thoughts slipped back to Gualberto and his history. The little wooden cross had been lying on the table beside her as she wrote, but she had scarcely noticed it. Now she looked at it and tried to



think of the monastery church and the relics—anything to distract her mind from the bitter memory of the past. But it was difficult to her to interest herself in antiquity just then. The facts of her own life were more important to her than the history of the saints of old.

## IV

*'Whatever fate  
Befall thee, I shall love thee to the end.'*

TENNYSON.

'WE call them *violini d'amore*,' said Adriano.

Cecily had found, at luncheon, that before her plate stood a little liqueur-glass filled with water, in which had been placed two delicate yellow pansies. They were the first of the season, and he had plucked them for the beautiful English lady, for whom all things *d'amore* must be appropriate. She was pleased with the attention, and smiled upon him as he liked to see her smile. Of late he had

thought that she looked melancholy, and he wondered why she stayed there so long alone. The *violini d'amore* might bring her luck!

Cecily did not know of his good wishes, but she took the pansies away with her, into her own little sitting-room, and let them stand on the table with her books and her colour-box and workcase — all the little occupations which she made for herself when the burden of thought became too heavy. She had books from Vieusseux's famous library at Florence every week, and she was diligently attempting a course of modern Italian literature; but for some days she had read very little. Now and then it occurred to her that she might as well leave Vallombrosa and go on to some Swiss resort. The bracing air of the Apennines, which

Dr Coldstream had prescribed for her, had surely done its work. Yet she could not make up her mind to pack her boxes and go; she shrank from the thought of leaving Italy. It was almost as if she expected something to come to her, to happen—here at Vallombrosa—before she left. There was something unfinished in her life to which she should always look backward with a kind of yearning, if she did not wait to see what the end might be. Life is full of these unfinished stories, but Cecily was young enough to fancy that hers might be an exception to the rule.

She did not formulate to herself the thing for which she craved. There was something alive, striving for utterance, striving for freedom, in her bosom, to which she was resolved to pay no heed.

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She knew that she must some day be forced to strangle this creature of her soul, as yet unborn; even to let it die of inanition was better than for it to breathe and see the light. It was a thing with a curse upon it. She strove with all her might to forget that it was alive.

And yet she waited — for she knew not what.

One afternoon she varied her walks by turning aside from the road to Vallombrosa into one of the woods with which the hill was covered. A roughly-paved path led upward between the fir trees, up and up to the very brow of the hill, from which the ground fell away, bare of trees and grassy, but dotted with granite boulders towards the valley. The path through the wood, however, was long and

winding, fringed with rose bushes and grassy banks, between which the great roots of the pines thrust themselves, like giant limbs, stretching sometimes right across the path. A few feet further back in the shadow of the trees, where the sun did not penetrate, there was little vegetation of any kind; only an occasional anemone or clump of bracken, forcing its way through the thick and fragrant carpet of brown firneedles with which the ground was hidden. The roses, not yet in bloom, lined the open space where they could catch the sunlight every day.

Cecily liked the scent and the cool shade of the woods. She soon lost sight of the hotel and the fair view beyond it, but she knew that a fine panorama would lie before her when she reached the top

of the hill, and she walked on slowly, sometimes mounting by the rough stone steps which made a *salita*, as Italians call it, up the hill-side, sometimes treading the firneedles under foot in the shadow of the trees. She heard a woodcutter's axe in the distance, the shrill noise of the *grilli* at her feet. Above her the steep, winding path seemed to lead to the blue heaven itself.

But between her and the blueness stood out distinctly at last the figure of a man. He was descending the path which she had taken. Presently they must meet face to face. Was it the woodcutter with his axe? a labourer? a priest? or was it simply some English or American tourist, straying over the hills on his way to Vallombrosa with a Baedeker in his hand?

As he came nearer she was struck with something familiar in his gait. A conjecture flashed through her suddenly—a conjecture which very quickly became a certainty. And if she could she would have turned and flown, for she was startled, amazed, even alarmed by the rencontre. But there was no way of flying, no way of hiding herself. She could not turn and run down the *salita*, like a frightened child. She could not hide among the straight red stems of the fir trees: she could but keep on her path, a tall white figure with a grave face, half in shadow, and a steady composure on her lips and in her eyes.

He, the man who met her, seemed far more discomposed and agitated than herself; but she was feeling an inward perturbation which she was determined not



to show. He pulled off his hat; she held out her hand. They looked at each other for a moment before speaking, and perhaps the silence was more significant than words. He was young, good-looking, taller than herself, and a good deal bronzed by the sun. He had the air of an athlete rather than of an artist—a successful artist too, whose pictures were hung on the line at the Academy, and talked of in the Salon. Frank Wycherly had made a name for himself earlier than most men succeed in doing; he had a gift about which there could be no doubt, although there was much discussion.

He must have lost his self-possession a little at this unexpected meeting, for he began to stammer out excuses.

‘Mrs Marchmont! I know you must be astonished to see me. I know you

said you wanted a little quiet and seclusion, but I thought you would not mind a short visit—'

'Were you coming to call on me?' said Cecily, with cool yet friendly eyes. 'I am pleased to see any of my friends from Florence.'

'I ventured over for the day,' said the young man, still not quite at his ease. 'I am going back by the evening train—most likely ; or—to-morrow, perhaps.'

The length of his stay evidently depended on the treatment which he received. Cecily could not help smiling at his embarrassment. It tended to give her back the courage that she had lost for a moment when she saw him first.

'You have been here before, of course,' she said composedly. 'You know the

monastery? I think you told me you had seen it.'

The colour mounted slightly to her fair cheek as she spoke. She remembered that it was he who had first told her Gualberto's story as they lingered by the low wall of the great piazza overlooking all Florence, on the way to San Miniato; the great dome and the campanile below them rising, with almost startling vividness, out of the crowd of red-roofed houses, with the red spire of the Badia and the turreted tower of the Palazzo Vecchio distinct amongst the lesser glories of the town, and 'the long, dark mass of Santa Croce,' as George Elliot calls it, carrying in its shadow a memento of death and judgment in the very midst of the sunshine. There, with the great cast of Michael Angelo's David behind

them, they had lingered for a sunny half-hour, while he told her the legends of the place and named to her the distant hills across the river and the nearer buildings, half hidden by the flush of peach blossom, with which all Italy seems to adorn itself in the early spring. They had turned then to the heights above the piazza, glad to meet a picturesque, brown-frosted Franciscan on the way; and Cecily had been shown the far-famed church, with its wonderful terrace, from which again all Florence could be surveyed; and had marvelled at the fields of tombstones which lay around the church, and at the extraordinary taste shown in the decoration of these homes for the dead. Then they had entered the church and lamented the absence of the great

wooden crucifix, and looked at the light streaming, blood-red, through the marble slabs behind the altar, and stood, wrapt in reverence, before the fine statue of the young Cardinal in one of the chapels, and shivered a little at the gloom and stillness of the crypt.

Where had lain the charm of all that sunny afternoon? The things that they had seen were beautiful indeed; but other things, yet more beautiful, had lacked that sense of loveliness, of mystery, of secret, strange delight which brooded over Cecily's memories of San Miniato on that sunny afternoon.

'Yes,' he said rather blankly, 'we were talking of it—when we went up to San Miniato last March. I have been here a good many times.'

They had turned round and were

walking side by side up the *salita*. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should accompany her.

‘How are my friends in Florence?’ she said, and then she named one or two, of whom he gave her the latest news.

‘But Florence is emptying fast,’ he added.

‘I thought you would have gone to England before now—to see the Exhibitions.’

‘The Exhibitions! Oh, I never care much about them. I am not sure whether I am going to England or not this summer at all.’

‘Indeed!’

There was only a faint accent of surprise in her voice. It seemed as if she did not care very much what he did

—whether he went or not. Her indifference piqued him into explaining himself more clearly.

‘I mean that it does not depend on myself. It depends on the decision of another person.’

He stole a look at her. By the deepening colour of her cheek he was sure that she understood. But she turned her face aside, and made a remark on some trivial subject, as if she did not desire any further discussion of his plans.

He refrained. They were breasting the hill together ; it was rather a pull, and he did not think it a good time for plunging into serious subjects. He returned to the safer topic of their common friends in Florence, and the things that had happened since she left them.

‘And you have not been lonely here?’ he asked her presently, reverting to the more personal strain.

‘Not at all. I have enjoyed these woods so much.’

‘You remember the Cascine, and how we went for a drive there with the Bordivals?’

Yes, she remembered well.

‘I went again by myself a night or two ago just to recall the pleasure of that evening.’

‘Did you?’

She had nothing else to say. But he went on rapidly.

‘It was not the same. How could it be? But I wished you had been there. You would have liked to see the fire-flies’—as if in explanation of his wish—‘they were everywhere, in hundreds,



in thousands, the little lamps dancing up and down, in and out, like fairy lamps. I have scarcely ever seen anything so beautiful. If you are spending a night in Florence on your way to England, you should make an expedition to the Cascine on purpose to see them.'

'I do not think I am going to England this year.'

'No! But you will not stay here much longer, I suppose?'

'I do not know,' she answered, rather curtly; and then, as he again looked crestfallen, she began to talk of something else.

They left the wood behind them and came out on the crest of the hill, from which they surveyed a fine panorama of mountain and valley. For some little

time the landscape supplied them with plenty of topics for conversation. He knew the country well, and pointed out to her the villages and towns dotted about the sides of the Arno, as it meandered through the wide green valley on its way to the sea. Slowly they made their way down the hillside, reaching at length a point at which Cecily had often paused—a jutting crag, where a cross had been erected to mark the spot where a man had once committed suicide by precipitating himself into the abyss below. A storm had, however, blown down the cross, and only the pedestal on which it had been placed remained to view.

They were nearing Saltino, but the spot was lonely enough, and the green banks near the roadway offered a

tempting resting-place. Wycherly suggested to his companion that she should sit down on a great mossy stone and rest awhile. It was growing late in the afternoon, and the sun was slanting towards the west. Below them the hills dipped into a deep ravine, down which the full water courses were flowing towards the river in the broad Arno valley, beyond which again rose the serried lines of the ever-mounting Apennines. Everything around them was very still. Only a bee buzzed in the beds of thyme, or buried himself in the sparse yellow blossoms of the flowering broom. And then Cecily said something which took her listener by surprise.

‘I think, if I were you,’ she said, ‘I would not stay so long away from England. It would be better for you, if you

do not mind my saying so, to live in London for part of the year.'

'I daresay it would be better,' he answered eagerly, rapidly, as if anxious to assure her that he was ready to do her bidding in all things 'I have often thought of it myself; but I had no attraction—no ties in London; and one learns to love Italy so well!'

'Yes, but in the summer—you do not stay here all through the hot months?'

'I am ashamed to say that I go off to the Tyrol and the Black Forest—generally on a walking tour,' said Wycherly, turning his pleasant smile towards her; 'but I daresay I might be better employed. You see'—apologetically—'I work pretty hard during the winter, and then, in summer, I like to get some air and exercise, and make studies as well. It is not

for sheer idleness, Mrs Marchmont, that I steer clear of London.'

'Oh, no! I did not think so,' said Cecily, rather faintly. She found it impossible to say exactly what she meant.

'If I had—*friends*—in London,' Wycherly continued, with a pause before the non-committal word, 'I should be more ready to go there. But I have no one—no one in the world who cares where I live, or what I do. It's a good thing in some ways—leaves one freer for one's art; but sometimes one feels a little lonely, you know.'

He did not say it in a sentimental tone. He was quite serious and matter-of-fact; but something in his voice made Cecily tremble. She became suddenly aware that he spoke with a purpose, that he meant to say the very thing that she had fled from hearing when she quitted

Florence. She sat up and looked about her, as in momentary panic.

‘It is growing late,’ she said quickly.  
‘I must be getting back to the hotel.’

‘It is not six o’clock,’ he responded, taking out his watch and looking at it.

‘No, but I must go.’ His eyes met hers in puzzled reproach. She paused, bit her lip and looked away. Then she steadied her voice to continue, ‘If you come to London you may perhaps meet my husband. He lives in London—he is a great connoisseur.’

She dared not look at him to see the effect of her words, but she was miserably conscious that he had given a quick start and was gazing at her as if he thought he had not heard aright.

‘Your—husband?’ he said slowly.

‘Yes, my husband,’ she answered in a

low, distinct voice. 'He lives on Campden Hill. I came abroad for the winter. He was busy; he could not come too.'

'I see,' said the young man. His voice was quiet, but it was changed. There was a moment's silence, and then he broke out passionately, 'My God! Why did you not tell me? You *must* have known!'

Cecily's face was very white, but she tried to speak in an unconcerned, indifferent manner.

'I do not understand you, Mr Wycherly. My friends knew—that—Mr Marchmont could not come.'

'You never spoke of him to me. You must have known that I—we all—thought that you were a widow,' cried Wycherly, almost brutally. 'You ought—what am I saying? I didn't mean to blame you; but—you have made it very hard for me.'

He was standing now, and with his stick he dug fiercely into the ground at his feet. His eyes were lowered, his brow bent, his teeth almost met in his lower lip. But, at the same time, it was plain that he was fighting hard for mastery over himself, and that he did not mean to yield to his own emotions for one moment if he could help it.

‘I did not know,’ said Cecily, weakly, and then the tears came, partly in self-reproach as well as in sorrow for his pain, and in a little self-pity too.

‘You must have known,’ he repeated, almost sternly, with his eyes still fixed upon the ground. ‘You must have seen what I felt—what I wanted. I never made any secret of it. All the world has known it—that I loved you and meant to ask you to be my wife. Why did



nobody tell me that your husband was alive? Surely you did not keep it purposely a secret for the sake—the sake, perhaps, of your power over me? I have heard of women who do such things, but *you*—surely not you?’

‘I am not better than other women,’ Cecily murmured. ‘I did it purposely—Yes, I wanted power over you.’ And then she hid her face in her hands. But there was a double meaning in her words which Frank Wycherly did not see.

He took one step away from her, then stopped short. She had made him very angry, and he was too outspoken by nature to hide the bitterness of his heart, so when at last he opened his lips his tone was almost cruel.

‘I have never known you, then,’ he said. ‘It was another woman whom I

loved—not you at all. Perhaps I had better congratulate myself on my escape.’

‘Yes,’ she said, scarcely above her breath.

‘You say it; you mean it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then—all I can say is, for God’s sake don’t use any other poor fellow as you have used me! You have fooled me all along—I see it now. You have let me talk to you—walk with you; you have looked at me as I thought no woman could look unless she loved me; you have tricked me at every turn! Some men would not be so patient even as I.’

‘Are you patient?’ she said, stung to a retort and to what seemed to him a mocking smile. ‘I should not have thought it, I confess. I never counted on your patience.’

‘Only on my stupidity? Not that? Then—on what, may I ask?’

‘I don’t know—I can’t say. I counted perhaps—’

She halted suddenly. She could not tell him that she had counted on his love. Yet that was what, at the bottom of her heart, she meant.

‘I am very sorry,’ she went on, changing her phrase. ‘I was much to blame. I can only ask you to forgive me and say—good-bye.’

‘Oh, yes,’ he said, very bitterly. ‘Forgive! that is an easy word. You think you can mend the hearts you have broken by asking men to forgive you? Pardon me for saying so, but you have done a cruel thing, and spoken a cruel word, Mrs Marchmont. I can only hope that you will never again treat a man as it has

been your pleasure to treat me since I have had the honour of your acquaintance.'

He stood stiff, resentful, angry with himself as well as with her, and looked at her. She was sitting on the stone, her face averted from him, hidden in her hands. What did she mean by her silence? If she had answered him he would have felt that he waged fair battle; but her quietness, her humility, disarmed him in spite of himself. And there were tears upon her face

He had meant to go without delay, but he lingered—partly because he thought that he could not leave her on the hillside by herself, partly because her silence and her helpless attitude appealed to his pity. All at once he cast his pride to the winds and held out his hands to her beseechingly.

'It can't be! You could not be cruel and false—I know you too well. Explain it to me. Don't let me go away thinking that you have wilfully deceived me for no reason, Cecily!'

She moved a little, and spoke brokenly.

'You must not call me by that name. You know you must not. It is all my fault. . . . I only ask you to go—never to let me see you again. I ought to have come away before.'

'Come away!' he said, almost doubting whether he heard aright. 'Left Florence, do you mean?'

'Yes. I ought to have left Florence sooner. I saw—and I did not want to see. I came here—away from you at last, for that reason, but I suppose it was then—too late.'

'If even then you had told me,' he said

in a gentler, but still reproachful, tone, 'it would have been better.'

'Yes, it would,' she assented; 'but, you see, it was hard for me too. I did not want to tell you. I thought it would be all right—you would forget me—if I went away.'

'You can never have loved—never have been loved, if you think that I shall forget you simply because you are away.'

'I hope you will,' she said, lifting up her face in her earnestness, and forgetting that he could then see the tears upon her white cheeks and the pathetic quiver of her lips. 'I should like to think that you would go away from here and never remember me again.'

'That is so likely, is it not?' he said, with dreary irony; and then he drew a little nearer to her, looking down on the

wet cheeks with a wild desire to kiss them once before he turned away forever. But she, perhaps, divined a possible danger ; at anyrate, she rose up, pressing the tears from her eyes and looking down the road as if she meant to move on. Some peasants came up from Saltino, singing loudly, and she shrank back at the sound as if she were afraid, so that Wycherly felt called upon to say in a low voice,—

‘I will walk with you to your hotel. It is too late for you to go down the hill alone.’

‘Thank you, but it is not necessary. I do not mind.’

‘I should not like you to go down alone,’ he said in a quietly masterful voice. ‘I will not annoy you. I will walk behind you, if you like, but I must see you safe home. I will try not to be in your way.’

‘You will not be in my way,’ she answered in a very low tone, and together they began the descent of the steep hill which led to Saltino.

They made the descent in silence. When the station and the few houses about it were reached, Cecily halted and looked at him inquiringly; she knew that it was about the time for the last train down to the valley. He answered her gesture by saying rather curtly,—

‘I have left my bag at Vallombrosa. I shall spend the night there and walk down to Pontassieve at dawn.’

She was half sorry, half relieved. It seemed to her that she had not yet said the thing she wanted to say; the thing she was not sure that she ought to say; and there were now five minutes more—perhaps even ten minutes, if they walked slowly—



in which to decide whether to say it or to be silent. At anyrate, she would not speak first. If he said no more, she, too, would be silent as the grave.

But when they had passed Saltino and reached the stretch of road that ran along the hillside to the Castello, Frank Wycherly spoke abruptly,—

‘Tell me one thing,’ he said: ‘are you happy with your husband? Do you care for him?’

She looked away towards the setting sun which was flooding all the land with light.

‘He does not care for me—that is the only answer I can make,’ she said.

Not care for her? It seemed impossible. Frank caught his breath at the idea. ‘Was he not good to you?’

‘We were not happy together. That was why I came abroad.’

‘You left him?’

‘Not formally. We just decided that I might as well spend a few months in Italy, and then he could—well, amuse himself in his own way.’

Wycherly muttered something inaudible.

‘I don’t mind now,’ said Mrs Marchmont, quietly; ‘I used to mind very much indeed. I don’t think I ever knew what happiness meant until I came abroad . . . everything was so new, so delightful. I shall never be so happy again.’

The young man’s heart softened to the note of desolation in her voice.

‘Oh, yes, you will be happy again,’ he said kindly. ‘You will have more pleasant winters and more—distractions by-and-by. And you may be sure that I will not trouble you. I will go somewhere else if you are going to winter in Florence again. I have

no desire to be a nuisance. Where shall I be most out of your way? Spain—Algiers?’

‘It makes no difference,’ she said, hastening her pace a little, for they were now very near the gate; ‘for very likely I may go to England, and even if we were in the same town, we could contrive not to meet, could we not?’

‘Oh, easily,’ he said. He wondered whether women knew how cruel they could be sometimes.

‘And, of course, we must not meet,’ she added, hesitating over the words.

‘No. Best not,’ said Wycherly.

‘I am very sorry. I thought we might have been friends, but—I suppose you will not forgive me—never believe that I was not deceiving you, as you said just now—’

‘You were not, you were not! I was

a fool to say so. I know you meant no harm. You would not have hurt me for the world,' he said, with a rueful smile, which had a touch of irony in it as well as pain.

But her response startled him ; for it was all pain.

'Oh, not for the world,' she cried, wringing her hands together. 'Not for all the world!'

They had stopped at the gate. Cecily laid her hand upon it, but Frank held it close.

'One moment! I must know. Does that mean that you, too—you cared—you could have loved me?'

'I almost meant to tell you,' she said, turning her pale face very calmly towards him. 'I think it is better for you to understand than always to think me cruel

and heartless. It was just because I found that I was learning to care—too much, that I came away. Now you will understand better—and you will see, too, that we must say good-bye; and, perhaps, some day you will forgive me, because—because—I have to bear the pain of it as well as you.'

She waited for no response but pressed past him through the gateway and was gone.

## V

*'With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night,  
That somehow the right is the right.'*

R. L. STEVENSON.

IN the evening there was a curious contrast between the tints of earth and sky. The mountains were of a cold dark blue, but the topmost ridges were edged with gold from the setting sun; a fleet of orange-golden clouds with purple streaks sailed slowly in a pale, clear sky, almost green in the south horizon, where the clouds changed to deeper violet and ruddier hues. Above these heavier masses of cloud

came trails of feathery cloudlets, all golden against the blue. Little by little the colours first deepened and then faded away; the golden clouds reddened, the sky grew greener, the mountain-edges more blackly violet. A universal shade of purple fell, like a pall, across the valley, where the Angelus came swinging slowly up from one of the villages in the plain. Eight o'clock, and almost dark, for the moon had not yet risen; but down in the valley one could still see the winding river running, white as snow or steel, between shadowy depths of unknown night.

Cecily had not dined. Her first impulse had been to lock herself in her own room, bury her face in her pillow and sob her heart out for the harm she had done and the burden of sorrow

she would have to bear. Then she had calmed herself a little and returned to her sitting-room, where, from the long window opening to the ground, she watched the sunset, and wondered whether she should ever know happiness again.

Her very wonder showed that she was young in years; for when we are older we know that every trouble which comes to us is, to some extent, a passing thing, and that although it may leave scars which ache and burn, and 'life be never the same again,' yet we shall live through it, as we have lived before through troubles equally keen. The question is *how* we live through it, not whether we shall do so or not. And there is always happiness on the other side.



In the twilight hush, when the sunset had almost faded, and lights were beginning to glimmer here and there in the valley shades, she was startled by a step on the gravel, a step which halted outside her window, at the foot of the broad stone steps. She could hardly see the face of the person who approached, but the figure was unmistakable, and she rose to her feet, with a low cry,—

‘You,’ she said, ‘again!’

The exclamation did not appear to be complimentary, but her heart had given a bound, which was so like one of joy that she had had to lay an iron grip upon herself lest she should betray it.

‘Yes, it is I,’ said Wycherly, in a low tone which, although calm, was

curiously expressive of effort. It was the voice of a man who had gone through a struggle and whose strength was nearly spent. He did not mount the steps, but stood with his hand upon the stone parapet, with his face turned towards Cecily, who had come to the doorway. His face was not yet clear to her, for, after lifting his hat ceremoniously, he had drawn it down over his eyes, but the little light, that remained shone full upon hers and showed its paleness, its sadness and the signs of tears. 'I will not disturb you for more than a minute or two,' he went on; 'and I must ask your forgiveness for coming at all; but—I have something to say.'

'I thought you had gone,' she said.

'I lost the train. I thought I had

better stay the night—at Vallombrosa. And then—it seemed to me that I must see you again.'

'I would rather not,' she said, drawing aside; and then, as if she feared that she had spoken discourteously, 'I think it would be better not. We agreed to say good-bye.'

'I know we did. I am not come to alter the terms of our agreement,' he pleaded. 'I want only to say two words, then I will go—I promise you I will—and never trouble you again.'

She was silent. It was no use, she could not fight against the accents of that pleading voice; she was weak as water, she knew, as long as they were in her ears. From her heart she hoped that he would ask her nothing that she must refuse, and that he would leave

her as soon as he had said what he wished to say. Previous experience had not taught her much belief in men; she had found them selfish, self-indulgent, bent on carrying out their own wills. It might be that, in the stress of temptation, Frank Wycherly was like the rest of them? Oh, if he would but go away and leave her to her dream!

Judging by her silence that he might approach her, he mounted the lower steps till he was almost close to her elbow. By a gesture she invited him to enter the room, but he shook his head, and, taking off his hat, mounted the last steps and stood beside her. There was a chair in the doorway; she sank into it, feeling as if she could not stand, while he looked down at her as

if in looking he had almost forgotten to speak.

It was Cecily's voice which recalled him to himself.

'You wanted to speak to me,' she said.

'I beg your pardon. Yes, just a word. I could not go away without asking your forgiveness.'

'Mine? But it is I that should ask forgiveness. *You* did not know.'

'Ah, but I understand better now—at least, I think I do. At anyrate, I must ask you to forgive me for my harshness and rudeness to you. I was a brute—and I can't go away until I have told you so.'

'You must not blame yourself,' Cecily roused herself to say. 'I know I ought to have spoken sooner—I can't quite

understand why I did not ; it seems like a sort of madness.'

Her voice died away into stillness, but there was a catch in her breath which went straight to Frank Wycherly's heart.

'Why should you? There was no necessity for you to tell me anything,' he said, and his voice was like a caress. 'You did better—you went away when you saw what I was feeling—and if I had not been a fool I should have known that you meant to avoid me. I ought to have taken the hint when you left Florence — if I had not been an ass it would have been quite enough. You did as much as anyone could possibly have expected you to do.'

'I hardly feel it so,' she said, very low.

'Then I am glad I came. Because

I want particularly to say to you that the more I understand, the more I honour you. At first I made a mistake—and it was a bitter one to me; now I am thankful to own that I was wrong. If you had wilfully deceived me I think I should have lost all my faith in women; I should never have trusted a face—a voice—again. But I trust you, I reverence you, my love—my only love!’

‘You must not—you must not,’ said Cecily, and she put out her hand as if to ward off the words to which she dared not listen.

‘And I will not,’ he answered, recovering himself and controlling his voice again. ‘I will not say a word to you—after to-night—to which all the world may not listen. But let there be no

concealments between us to-night, Cecily. If I had known I would have gone to the ends of the earth sooner than run the risk of giving you pain, but since I did not know—did not suspect—why, then, surely it is no blame to me that I *have* loved you; and for the rest—we will do right, and leave the result to God. He must make what He wills of it—and of us.'

'Ah, you believe in God?' she said.

'I should not have dared to come back to you to-night if I did not.'

'I always thought I believed, too; but lately I have hardly known—all the world has seemed dark.'

'It will not always be dark. Take courage. Let us both be brave—as brave as we can. It is hard for us both—harder for you than for me.'



She put her hand over her eyes so that he should not see her tears. But perhaps he saw, for he moved restlessly, as if he could hardly bear to stay, and then turned his face away to the purple mountains, with features and limbs rigidly set and lips that had grown white as stone.

‘You don’t know how hard it is,’ she said.

He seemed to find a difficulty in answering. ‘No,’ he said at last, in a moved voice. ‘No, I daresay I do not.’

‘You will have your work. You will be able to lose yourself in it; and then you have success—’

‘God knows that I care very little for success,’ he broke in.

‘Still, it is something—something to care for—and I have nothing at all.’

‘Can you not make something to care for? or, at least, find something to do?’ he asked her, gently; ‘something that would occupy your mind—your thoughts?’

‘I don’t know. There is nothing I care about.’

‘No, the caring comes afterwards.’

There was a long silence. Then she said hesitatingly, ‘My husband is ill—I have sometimes thought I ought to go back to him.’

‘I can’t advise you,’ he said hurriedly.

‘I can’t judge. I can only say what I said before, let us do right, the highest right of which we are capable, and although we are in the darkness now, light will come in time—in God’s own time.’

‘I will try,’ said Cecily, in a low tone. ‘But I am not strong like you.’

‘You are stronger than you know,’

said Wycherly. And he stood silent, subdued by all that he could not put into words, by the feeling that she belonged to him, that their souls were made one for the other — the old claim that passion always makes on the whole being of the beloved; a claim as futile as it is unreasoning. But at last he roused himself. 'It is growing late,' he said, 'and I must go. We must say good-bye.'

It was indeed almost dark, but the light of a lamp, which Cesira had left upon the sitting-room table, threw a faint glow out into the night. The house was silent, the stars were bright overhead, and a light wind rustled the upper branches of the trees that fringed the terrace and stood darkly upright against the background of shadowing landscape

and open sky. There was an impression of stillness that was almost mournful; and, to Cecily, all at once the world seemed to have grown intolerably bare.

Scarcely knowing what she did, she rose up, flinging her arms before her.

‘Oh, I can’t bear it—I can’t bear it!’ she moaned. ‘It is too hard to bear.’ She did not know what she said. Afterwards the memory of her words returned to her with a sensation of burning shame.

For him it was a moment of dire temptation. With all the force of his manhood he longed to take the slender white figure in his arms, to pillow the dear dark head on his breast, to kiss away the tears from her eyes.

And he would not do it. He stood firm. She was another man’s wife.

It passed through his mind, as swiftly as lightning passes, that he was old-fashioned, antiquated, perhaps, in his views; that most men in his position would not hesitate to take advantage of her evident love for him, that few would refrain from trying at least to comfort her in her distress. It was physical pain to him to hold back his hand from hers, to keep himself strong and steady, standing with his back to the window-frame, instead of springing to her side and taking her into the embrace of arms that ached to clasp her to his breast. He felt as if he were drawn towards her by invisible hands, as though he were tearing apart some living fibres which subsisted between himself and her, and that they bled invisibly on her side as well as his own. But he held him-

self still, like a man who is undergoing some terrible operation without chloroform and only asks himself, 'How long will it last?' and 'Can I bear it to the end?'

He almost envied Cecily the relief of tears, and yet it pained him inexpressibly to see them, and to know that he was the cause that they were shed.

To stand by, with set teeth and folded arms, at such a moment—was it not a worse trial than to endure an enemy's fire, or to hold out a limb for the surgeon's knife? He thought so afterwards; he had no time just then to make comparisons. He was absorbed in steady endurance of pain, in maintaining an absolute rigidity of will.

He had always meant to keep his

life clean and honourable, and hitherto he had passed unscathed through the bulk of temptations which assail men. He had a contempt for vice, for baseness of any kind. And he had a profound belief, without much apparent orthodoxy of opinion, in the divine ordering of things and the necessity of fealty to divine law. Not even for the sake of the woman he loved would he throw his life and hers into disarray. He was perfectly certain that if at that moment he did the thing which he was tempted to do, he would gain no happiness, but a lifelong sorrow for himself and perpetual misery for her—the woman whom he set too high in his thoughts to believe that she could be happy with the shadow of guilt upon her soul.

Silence and a speedy departure were

best. But how could he go with Cecily's sobs rending his very soul? She was not a woman given to crying, he suspected; he had never seen her shed a tear before. But he must try to comfort her—not by that easy way of kisses and caresses, which were forbidden him, but—by words that she would not be afraid to remember by-and-by. And these were very difficult to speak. A man shrinks from laying bare his soul, even to the woman he loves, although it is easy enough to show her his heart.

‘Will you hear me for a moment?’ he said very gently. And something in his voice made Cecily ashamed of her tears. He suffered too, she knew it; and yet he could be brave and strong. She also would try to be brave—strong.



She did not think that she could be; but courage always appealed to her. She could bear to be anything but a coward. Yet — where did true courage lie?

His voice roughened and thickened a little as he spoke, but it maintained, by sheer force of his will, a note of indomitable resolve.

‘You are not a weak woman,’ he said. ‘You are strong—or you may be strong—as well as good; and, therefore, I am sure you will be able to bear this burden that has come upon us — come upon us, I think without much fault of our own, but which we have to carry — somehow, you and I. . . . We may not be very happy in our lives, but we can keep clear, at least, of the worst unhappiness—choosing the lower road, and

doing base things instead of noble ones—making it impossible for us to respect ourselves, or each other. We do not want to land ourselves in that slough, do we?’

‘No. Oh, no!’

‘We might have done . . . and regretted it all our lives afterwards. You would have regretted it yourself, and held me in horror; and I—I could not answer for myself. I should never have ceased to love you—no, that could not be—but I should have had no hold on the highest side of things. You can guess how it would be. We should sink—together—to hell!’

There was a strange inflection in his voice. Did he—for one moment—wonder whether the joy of union might be worth that risk of hell? If so, it was for one moment only; for it was no material hell

of fire he dreaded, but the hell of noble souls—the hell which means death and outer darkness to high deeds and noble aspirations—the hell of baffled aims and dying hopes and dull despair. Better any pain, any suffering, than a hell of apathy to the difference between right and wrong.

Cecily emphasized his own conviction. 'Better die than live that life,' she said briefly.

'I knew you would say so.' He felt a moment's bitterness in the knowledge of her likeness to himself in heart and soul, but it was succeeded by a kind of sober exultation. 'I knew you would think so. If we were unfaithful to the relationships that have already been made for us—if we broke the ties that bind us to others who trust us, what right should

we have to look for trust or love, even from each other? What claim could we have to happiness—snatched at as a thief might snatch at a jewel which he could not openly wear? At anyrate, let us feel that no one suffers through us, that we have not gained anything at the price of another's unhappiness.'

There was silence. Cecily held her head down and did not speak. Perhaps he understood what she felt—that no action of hers was likely to cause unhappiness to the husband who did not care for her—for he resumed, in a slightly lower tone,—

'And even if we were alone in the world—even if we had no one who would suffer, apparently, from the effects of our deeds—even if we found ourselves, as it were, on a desert island, set apart from

the world which judges and condemns—even *then*, would it be worth while to be false to our ideals, to the vows we have made, to ourselves and our God?’

‘You are nobler than I,’ said Cecily. ‘My heart seems to cry out for something for itself in spite of all, but I know how right you are—I will try to feel as you do—I *think* as you do already.’

‘It will be a hard fight for both of us,’ he said simply, ‘but there is no doubt about the victory.’

‘No doubt?’

‘Not the least doubt. In our own way, we shall both fight it through. Not forgetting—we shall never forget—but conquering. Shall it not be so?’

She turned towards him quickly, her eyes lighting up, her face flushing slightly, a new courage speaking from every line.

‘I promise you that it shall. I was weak for a moment, thinking of what the future might bring. But I will do my best to struggle through—through the loneliness—the friendlessness—all that makes one despair sometimes of one’s life, of one’s self, of God! I shall comfort myself with thinking that I may some day get a little nearer your level—even if I am not near you.’

‘*My level!*’ he said, and sighed. ‘You little know how base my life looks near yours. But it will be a great deal to me to know that we are both of one mind — struggling upwards in the same path. We cannot set our aims too high.’

There was again a silence. Then he turned to her abruptly, rather as though the strain of the interview were becoming

too much for his self-possession and self-control.

‘I must go,’ he said. ‘I have stayed already far longer than I meant to do. Cecily, I call you so for the last time—Cecily, good-bye!’

‘Good-bye, Frank!’

Their hands met for a moment—lingered, then were quietly drawn apart. A strange pair of lovers, doubtless: they who looked so calmly into each other’s eyes, so calmly and yet so thoughtfully, and made so little demonstration of their inward agony. Yet, at that last moment, the wildest and bitterest temptation surged across them both. For just one moment Cecily felt that she would give the world to throw herself upon his breast and be soothed and comforted in his arms. And he, in his turn, wondered ever afterwards how the strength

came which kept him from throwing all his resolutions to the winds and taking her to himself forever.

‘God help us!’ he said, half aloud, without knowing that he spoke.

And then he turned away, turned his back upon her, went down the steps and along the level walk until he reached the corner of the house. Cecily watched him with straining eyes, every muscle tense, as she stood outside the window, until he turned the corner and disappeared. He had not once looked back. If he looked he felt that his self-command would be shaken—might possibly fail utterly and never be renewed.

When he was gone Cecily sank back into her chair, trembling in every limb. She gazed blankly before her, without any sob or tear; her hands lay on her knees,



the palms turned slightly outward, a sure sign of lassitude or despair. She was possessed by a sense of extreme fatigue. Her strength seemed to have left her, and the whole world went round before her eyes. For a minute or two she lost consciousness of everything around.

Then she sat up, and sight and hearing and memory came back to her. And with them came that passionate reaction of feeling which is so apt to follow on a high resolve. For a few minutes it seemed to her that she had been a fool to consent to put from her the love that would have made her joy—that she had uselessly sacrificed her happiness for a figment, for a phantasmal heaven in which it was folly to believe. She did not care about her own goodness, nor for Frank's ideals; she wanted him, him only, to be near her, to

love her for ever and ever, and she wanted nothing else.

‘Oh, come back! come back!’ she wailed, with the tears streaming down her face, and her hands clasped tightly before her. ‘Frank, my love, I love you! Come back!’

The wind moaned through the trees, and the *grilli* chirped in the grass, but there came no other answer to her ear. The stars shone, with their bright indifference, above her head, the world seemed so silent that one felt inclined to listen for sounds that were supernal, for some strange music of the spheres. Little by little this silence and stillness stole into her heart, and its tumult began to cease.

She shuddered then at her own wickedness. How could she have felt, even for a moment, that the great ideals of conduct

were of no importance to her? What good would life and love do her if honour and uprightness and purity were gone? Bending her head upon her hands, she thanked God that Frank Wycherly was out of hearing before her cry could call him back; that she had not, by her momentary weakness, tried to wreck his life and her own. Her whole soul rose up in revolt against the faltering of her heart. She had never known that she would be so weak, or that he, Frank, was so strong.

It came accross her as a wonderful thing that she had met a man who tried honestly to do his duty, and who was not ashamed to acknowledge that he had duties both to God and man. She did not know that she had ever before come into intimate acquaintance with any man of the sort. Her husband had stood for her as

a representative of the typical man: cold, callous, self-indulgent, rather small minded, so he had appeared to her; and from him she judged others to be the same. Frank's high mindedness was a revelation to her. She said to herself, humbly, that she was not equal to him, that she, in her relations with him, had not afforded any proof of the oft-repeated truism that women are morally superior to men; that she had needed to be supported by his strength before she could attain to the height that he had reached. Dimly she apprehended a state of affairs in which this would be the natural state of things: when man should be first in his allegiance to the Divine, and woman should learn from him the depth of her dependence upon God. It was a beautiful dream, and perhaps one which ought to be realised on earth;

but there are few signs of its realisation as yet.

Silently, with her face still hidden by her hands, she recognised one gleam of comfort in the tempest that had overtaken her. She had, at least, not loved unworthily. She had given her heart to a man who would tear his own heart out rather than do a wrong thing — a man who knew that the highest good of life is to strain after truth and righteousness. It was a great thing to be able not merely to love, but passionately to admire.

And it was to her an inexpressible relief to think that there were others like him in the world; and that, although times are changed since men gave their blood for the Church, or lived as hermits in woods and caves, yet there are still faiths and hopes for which they will give

up what is dearer to them than life itself, and earn for themselves, in silence and obscurity, rewards that equal the martyr's crown.

She herself would follow slowly and stumblingly in their wake; fainting sometimes in the struggle, yet never utterly discouraged; taking courage from the knowledge that they also were fighting those enemies of the spirit, which assail us in this century exactly as they did in days of old, when people openly named them the world, the flesh and the devil.

## VI

*' Then I knelt  
And dropped my head upon the pavement, too,  
And prayed, since I was foolish in desire  
Like other creatures, craving offal-food,  
That He would stop His ears to what I said,  
And only listen to the run and beat  
Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood—  
And then  
I lay and spoke not, but He heard in heaven.'*

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

It is but a stone's throw from the church and monastery to the gorge, where flows the torrent whose voice sounds in your ears when you kneel to pray in San Gualberto's chapel. The stream descends from the mountain side, almost hidden

by the thickly - serried trees, until it reaches the rocky cleft down which it leaps to the shady valley—the *Vallis-Umbrosa* of the monkish records, the name which has a special music of its own.

Following a shady path for a few yards through the trees outside the convent wall, you come to a well-kept road which crosses the stream and winds away round a shoulder of rock to higher ground among the woods. The bridge across the water is edged with a low wall of mossy stones, in the crevices of which grow tufts of cranesbill and bluebell, and it is pleasant to sit upon the seat thus provided and watch the stream on either side. The trees on the banks grow to a great height, and throw a pleasant shade, flecked with sunshine gleams, on



the white road. Looking up, one sees the deep blue of the Italian sky between a network of graceful branches and golden leaves, where the wild birds nest undisturbed, and fly and twitter as they will.

From the bridge the torrent is seen to make its way between a wall of granite on one side and a steep green bank upon the other, and over a bed of sloping stones, some of which have been artificially piled one above the other, so as to increase the apparent height of the waterfall — skilfully piled and arranged, however, so that the rudeness and wildness of the scene may not be thereby decreased. On either side the water, above the bit of granite crag, and along the bank, tall fir trees rise to an immense height — their slender stems, half-covered with moss and draped with ivy,

forming interminable processions against a background of living green. The banks are sprinkled with forget-me-nots of the brightest blue, mingling with clusters of fern between the mossy stones, and, nearer the water, with long sprays of ivy trailing over the wet stones, with the yellowest of yellow buttercups, with small, white blossoms which look like showers of spray, and the vivid pink of the ragged-robin wreathing the rough stones to the very edge of the white, foaming waters. Two or three magnificent beech trees mingle their emerald green with the darker branches of the pines.

Beyond the bridge the stream winds more gently, so that logs of wood and small stones lie idly in its bed, and the trees seem to droop their heads tenderly towards the stiller waters. On either side

are the firs, with long vistas of green between their shining stems. As you cross the bridge, the road ascends between higher and lower banks, all crowned with fir, until a second torrent is reached, leaping from the higher ground to join the mightier stream below.

They are small torrents indeed, scarce worthy, perhaps, of a description, but they have a winning beauty which you sometimes miss in a world-famed waterfall. It is the broad, genial sun of Italy, perhaps, which gives them half their charm, making every drop glitter, gilding every green leaf that grows beside them, colouring common flowers with rainbow hues. The great slanting rocks which line one side of the road shine in the sun as the white fall of water rushes over them, scattering showers of diamond drops upon the green

moss and delicate ferns and wilding flowers that spring from every cranny. Here the road is overhung with beech and hazel, through which the birds flit lightly, and the firs and pines seem left behind, while a wealth of star-wort beneath them lights up the shadows like a flock of seagulls on a northern sea.

Again there is a different outlook from the other side of the road. The water makes a deep drop from the archway beneath the bridge, and then goes straight along the broken ground to join the larger stream. Near the point where the two waters meet there is a plot of almost bare ground, where the sunshine streams fully between the sparse stems of the pines. But on either side this water the trees are tremendous giants, looking as if they rose to the very heights of heaven,

with perfectly straight, long trunks and dark, level branches tipped with brilliant green.

Here close to the torrents, there is no such impression of silence as you receive in a country where the water slides gently between level grassy banks. There is always a certain stress in the sound of a waterfall. It thunders by the roadside, above and below, until you can scarcely hear yourself speak; there is a continuous, tireless rush from the woods above you, a musical tinkling in the gorge below. Even the birds' notes are only heard faintly, and as if with doubt. Sound fills the ear and the landscape: a sense of energy and unrest.

Further away, in the Gualberto chapel, for instance, or on the road as it turns the corner of the hill, the noise is less

insistent, less overbearing, so to speak. At a distance it tunes into a song, even into a soothing lullaby. Cecily Marchmont, after sitting for a time upon the stone wall of each waterfall in turn, found that the noise made her restless and incapable of thought. The scene was exquisitely beautiful, yet, with that sound of many waters in her ears, she did not feel alone. And she wanted to be alone, so as to get her fancies clear.

Still, the torrent attracted her. There was something vigorous, healthful, brilliant in the flash of its white waters over the stones. As long as the sunshine flecked the banks with gold, and brought out into vivid prominence the starry-white flowers and the blue forget-me-nots, the scene was lovely in the extreme. The strong, brown, leaping water, with its crest

of foam, fascinated her. But she fancied that there was a sternness only half concealed about these great black rocks, which shone in the sunlight, wet with spray and wreathed about by graceful ivy trails; and the rushing water might be cruel in its strength, and the boulders in the torrent-bed hard and sharp. When the flowers were gone and the beech trees had lost their leaves, and the winter wind howled furiously down the gorge, as it must do sometimes, there was surely little promise of peacefulness, little hint of brightness in the scene. It gave Cecily a sort of chill to think of this aspect of the place, and she got up hastily from her seat and turned back to the road that led to the monastery. She had not been there for some days, not since the day of Frank Wycherly's visit, which

seemed to her now as if it had taken place a month ago.

The struggle through which she had passed had paled her face a little, and left her eyes sad, her lips grave. She had felt a sense of extreme exhaustion, followed by a measureless depression, which grew upon her as the days went by. There was a vagueness in the depression, too, a certain softness of feeling which was preferable to the bitter and degrading storms of fury and jealousy which she had known when she lived with her husband; but there was a slow heartache at the back of it all which sometimes made her very restless, and which she did not think she could outlive. For some occult reason she had avoided the church, not even going out to Mass on the Sunday morning; but on this day she



had a fancy for the silence and solitude of Giovanni Gualberto's chapel, and she made her way across the great paved courtyard, under the heavy archway, and up the damp, worn stone steps to the church, which, as usual, she found empty.

She seldom lingered in the great church itself. It was a little desolate upon these silent week days. Up the chancel steps and to the left, until she reached the side-chapel, with its *bizarre* gilding and rococo plaster figures, and the big painting behind the altar, and the cold marble beneath her feet, and the memory of a saint to invest the whole place with life and warmth and assurance of better things than those of earth.

Cecily seated herself on one of the wooden chairs before the *prie-Dieu*, with her hands in her lap. She was tired;

she was not even inclined to think. The murmur of the torrent, softened by the distance, was very pleasant; occasionally she heard a bird chirp, or saw it flash across the upper windowpanes, through which the blue Italian sky could be seen. One lamp burned before the altar, and its flame symbolised to Cecily the faith and hope of centuries, still alight in the church, forgotten by the world.

She leaned forward a little and looked at the framed prayer on the desk before her, noting especially the printed picture of Gualberto himself, with his beard and his halo, his cross and his sword. She had seen many pictures of him in Florence, he was a favourite character with the early Florentine artists, who were proud, perhaps, of their local saint; but it struck her just then that no one

had ever painted him, so far as she knew, at that great crisis of his life which turned him from a gay young gallant into a saint. It was the hermit life that had seemed so saintly to the gay Florentines: the silence of '*le solitudini di Vallombrosa*,' the brown frock and hempen girdle, the austerities, the penances; yet they had all their root in that wonderful act of self-renunciation and forgiveness of injuries at San Miniato, and the moment when Gualberto knelt side by side with his enemy before the altar of God was the one which set its seal upon all his life.

In the forest solitudes—more solitary then than now—how often did he look out over the hills to the spot where fair Florence lies, rose-red in the morning light, and pray for the souls of those

who had once been his companions and friends? In the streets of the bright, tumultuous, joyous little city, life still went on as in the days when he had formed part of its perpetual, many-coloured pageant. Did he never yearn for the processions and the palaces, the incense rising from splendid altars before newly-painted Madonnas and miraculous shrines, the wonderful old bridges over the golden Arno, the piles of flowers—great purple irises and blood-red roses and snow-white lilies—sold then, doubtless, as now, at the corners of the streets? Then the feasts behind the iron-barred windows of the palaces, and the ladies that looked out from between the grilles, and the sound of viol and lute, and the colour of the wine when it is red: did he never think of all these things as he looked

down at Florence from his forest solitudes? Or was he changed so utterly from the gay cavalier that he cared no longer for any of these things? And what had changed him?

Ah! the story told her that. The criminal's appeal to Christ would scarcely have been enough, if Christ upon the Cross had not looked upon Gualberto's face and smiled.

She drew the brown-framed prayer towards her, and let her eyes rest upon the words, 'Voi che chiamate da Gesù pendente nella Croce, lasciate il mondo e vi destate tutto a lui nelle solitudini di Vallombrosa.' Oh, how easy would it be to leave the world, gay and glittering and joyous as it might be, if one were only called by Jesus, hanging on the Cross! How easy to give oneself entirely

to Him in the solitudes of Vallombrosa if one possessed a faith like Gualberto, which could, indeed, remove mountains! But it was not necessary to leave the world. She went on with the simple prayer, 'Ottenetemi la grazia che io porti, volentieri, quella Croce che il mio e vostro Dio avrà determinato che porti.'

The words were full of meaning. 'Your God and mine . . . the cross that He decreed that I should carry . . . the grace that I may carry that cross willingly. . . . Ah! my God,' she cried suddenly, 'if it is a cross that I must bear, grant me, indeed, the grace to bear it as I ought!'

She sank down on her knees, bending her head over the prayer-desk, on which her tears fell, one by one, like a shower of warm rain. They seemed to relieve her heart from its burden. In the last

few days she had been as one oppressed by a heavy load; she had felt cold, helpless, oppressed: these tears came like the breaking of a frost, and, even if they were painful, they brought with them a sense of life. Was there, indeed, a way of escape from the perplexity, the bewilderment, which had been weighing on her? Was there, indeed, a mode of viewing things which would make trouble light, and bring back peace and comfort to her days?

The birds sang outside the window, the falling waters in the distance kept up their everlasting musical monotone; all else was very still. The church was empty. No one sought the little side chapels for prayer in working time; only this one woman knelt at Gualberto's shrine, and poured out her soul to God—his God and hers.

She did not know that she was praying. Perhaps the most effectual prayers are unvocal, unconscious. She simply let her whole being float out on the one thought, the one desire—that of union with the higher spiritual influences of life, of dominion over her baser impulses, of intercourse with the Divine.

Surely to many—perhaps to all—it is given to have moments of passionate volition, of choice between good and evil; when the soul asserts its lordship over the flesh, and the heart, torn and bleeding although it be, yields itself meekly to the guidance of that nobler part to which it owes allegiance. These are the times when man lifts himself to the Divine, when, in spite of the pain they cost us, we know that there are things dearer to us than pleasures



of the senses, even than achievements of reason, and (nearer to us and more intimate) than even earthly love. It is those who do not know such moments, nor the meaning of such victories, who are to be pitied after all; for by the very marks of these conflicts shall we some day be recognised as children of God, like Him who was more marred than any man, yet more Divine.

As Cecily knelt a curious light shone in upon her mind. For the first time her path lay plain before her, and she knew what she ought to do. With an odd, fanciful remembrance of the printed prayer before her, she almost thought that the hermit of Vallombrosa was pointing out the way.

‘Entbehren sollst du: sollst entbehren’ has been the watchword of many lives.

She had always set herself against the law of renunciation. She had argued that happiness was the law of nature, and should not be lightly set aside, that, just as we call it wicked to throw away good bread and wine, we ought to feel it wrong to squander our own joys or those of others. Self-denial had no place in her theory of life. It had seemed incomprehensible to her that men and women should willingly put down from their lips a cup of pleasure that they might drink if they chose, that they should renounce the things they loved at any call *save* that of love. To renounce for the Beloved's sake was beautiful indeed; she could understand what that meant—to deny oneself, to go hungry and thirsty, to bear poverty and sickness and insult and injury for the sake of one you love

was explicable enough. But to do it for one that you did not love, or for some far-away ideal of Duty and Right—it was this which had seemed strange to Cecily, and far removed from her ideas of what her life should be. Renounce!—and why?

The modern world spoke of self-development and self-culture, of duty to one's own intellect and capabilities. Cecily had heard much concerning the justifiable desire of women to 'live their own lives,' without opposition from their friends. She had not yet had sufficient experience to know how disastrous a failure 'living one's own life' may sometimes prove. It is the life of others that we live, the life of the Christ 'that is to be,' in them and in ourselves, before wisdom blossoms within us and love puts forth her fruit.

It was this teaching of the world around

her which had caused Cecily first of all to revolt against the life that she led in her husband's house. She had rebelled against its dullness and narrowness before she had any clear idea of her husband's sins against her; she had felt herself injured by all the limitations it imposed on her, especially that limitation of the affections which was almost sure to be felt by an unloved wife without a child. She wanted to love—she would have loved—Anthony Marchmont if he had let her; she pined less to be cherished than to cherish someone else. She had no fancy for the charities into which some women threw their strength; besides, Anthony would not have let her 'waste' money or time upon them. As she had told Frank Wycherly, she had few interests in the world, and knew not where to turn for an occupation or a

distraction that should be in the least effectual.

When she discovered the reason of her husband's coldness towards her she felt herself completely justified in taking her own way and leaving him. Perhaps she was. In these cases it is sometimes very difficult to say. Certain it is that if Cecily had stayed with him she would have been a very miserable woman, despairing of hope and life and love. She might have sunk into an incurable invalid; she might have ended her days in a lunatic asylum. The last limit of her strength would very soon have been reached.

But she came away resolved 'to live her own life,' as the jargon of the day has it. She was liberated by her husband's actions; she had no reason to think that she was behaving wrongly or making

a mistake. She did not choose to consult anyone on the subject. It was enough that she knew herself wronged, and that she resented the situation. Nobody had a right to interfere. And Anthony himself had made no objection to her leaving him; indeed, she was almost sure that he had been relieved.

So she had come away to Italy, resolved to learn and to enjoy, eager, in her tranquil way, for all that was beautiful and ennobling, ready to profit by every experience, and rejoicing in the knowledge that she was able to take her own way, to drink in great draughts of pleasure without a carping critic at her side, to enjoy the sun, the air, the streets, the churches, the galleries, without any fear of coldness or unkindness from the man who had once sworn to love her and keep her until his

life's end. She was conscious of a feeling of immense relief when it occurred to her that he was in England, and that in all probability she would never live with him again. She was bent upon gaining from Italy all that Italy had to give her, and she looked upon it as the land of art and of music, of sunshine and liberty and joyousness. . . .

Was renunciation the only lesson that it had to teach her after all?

'Grant that I may willingly bear the cross Thou hast ordained that I should bear.' It was Gualberto's voice speaking for her from the dead.

Yes, she would bear it. She would cast in her lot, at all events, with the heroic souls of the earth—she so unheroic, so feeble, so apt to be sorry for herself, so slow to share the burdens of others—she would take their side in the fight for truth and righte-

ousness. Not in vain should her lover have struggled for the right; not in vain, either, should Giovanni Gualberto have vanquished himself and his enemy at the foot of the Cross, on the road winding up to the cypresses of San Miniato. As they did, so in her measure would she do.

And then the remembrance of their mere examples fell from her, and she knew herself alone, weak, distracted, fearful, seeking help from human hands no longer, but throwing herself straight into the arms of God.

After a time she rose from her knees, but she could not tear herself immediately away. She felt weak, broken, as if the strain of some long resistance had suddenly slackened and left her without support. She sat down and looked absently at the picture above the altar.



It represented the saint in his hermit's robe, praying under the beech tree from which had been carved the little wooden cross which the sacristan had given her not many days ago. In her lassitude her mind strayed involuntarily to the details of his story, and more especially to that scene on the road to San Miniato on Good Friday, when his brother's murderer met him and was forgiven.

Cecily drew herself together with a start. The story bore a new meaning for her now. She had braced her strength for the task of renunciation. She was willing to give up her love, her hope of happiness, for the right; but she had not yet considered whether or no she was ready to *forgive*. Yet that was what renunciation meant for her.

It would not be enough to put Frank

Wycherly out of her thoughts and try to forget him. It would not even be enough to find some good and useful work with which to occupy his mind and make the world a little better and happier. Nor enough even to wrap herself in sublime thought of divine things, and in looking at the lovely hills, the ever-changing clouds, the exquisite lights and shades upon the uplands and the sunny peace of the meadows. to lose herself in God. Even that—although it seemed at first like a call to a higher life—was not enough. It was all very well to talk of duty towards God, but duty towards man, was not that the very thing that duty towards God was meant to teach? And was it not her duty to go back to her husband in England? to lead the wear-

some, monotonous life, in the long unlovely street, and to do what she could to bring him back to her and to release him from the chains which a hard and, perhaps, a sinful life had wound about him?

The letter that she had received from her lawyer was very present to her mind. Anthony was ill, it had said, and she was wanted in London—at his side. She had smiled scornfully at the notion and put it away from her; but now it returned in full force.

It had been different when he was well and strong. He had not wanted her and had been pleased to let her go. Now—well! the lawyer seemed to intimate that he wished to see her. She did not know whether he was seriously ill, or only suffering from some slight

indisposition, but if he were really ill and wanting her—surely her place was at his side? Some latter-day moralists might argue that she had no duty towards him since he had so shamefully neglected his duty to her; but Cecily could not forget that she had taken him ‘for better, for worse,’ and that, although it might be very much ‘for worse,’ she had no right to set aside her marriage vow.

She might go back. She drew a long breath and considered it. What would happen if she went?

He might not be glad to see her. He might scoff at her, repudiate her, tell her that he had been very happy in her absence, and that she might go back whence she came. In that case, she could go—happy, perhaps, in feeling that she was free. Or

he might be unwell enough to be glad of her presence, to feel that someone was in the house to control the vagaries of the housemaid and to secure punctuality from the cook. This was, perhaps, the more likely prospect; and she would be allowed to settle down in his house as a sort of superior housekeeper, with no wages and no holidays. It was not a pleasant outlook in itself, and there was the chance of cold looks and sneers and sarcasm besides.

Then, almost unexpectedly to herself, Cecily's spirit awoke and flamed up, but in an entirely different way from any to which she was accustomed. After all, it was her duty to bear coldness and unkindness from her husband; for had she not—in spirit—wronged him almost as much as he had wronged her? Had she not given her love to another? Could she

stand aloof, really thinking herself far above him, when in her heart she knew how ready she had been to yield to temptation? Surely she could say no longer that it was not her part to forgive. She *must* forgive, because she had need to be forgiven.

Was it so difficult? Ah! not difficult at a distance; but when close at hand—when she would have to put up with the old sharpness and coldness, submit to the old narrowness of life, try not to see the things that could not be mended—then it would be difficult indeed!

She need not go back to her husband if he did not want her; she was not bound to do that, she thought, for he had been often, and grievously, to blame; but if, as Mr Walrond had hinted, he was ill and wishful for her presence, then she did not

see how she could refuse to go. There was a new spirit within her which held itself ready to make reparation wherever reparation could be made, which forgave past injury, and would bear patiently with weariness and disgust. She scarcely knew how to account for the change which had come upon her like a dream. Even so, perhaps, had Gualberto found his heart changed and softened when he knelt with his enemy before the crucifix.

There might be a long life of misery before her. She could not tell what her husband's treatment of her was likely to be if she went back to him again. He might think himself so sure of her that self-restraint was no longer necessary. She had known women whose lives were one long martyrdom through their husbands' coldness, neglect, unfaithfulness. . . .

Was *hers* to be like that? Was this the choice that she was indeed to make out of love for her ideal of truth and duty, when she might, without incurring blame in the eyes of the world, spend her life in peace, in beautiful places, in the enjoyment of all, or almost all, that this fair world has to offer? Was it right that she should do this from a sense of duty to the man who had long ago ceased to treat her with affection? She shivered a little at the thought.

Ah! but it was not all from a sense of duty to the man she had married that she was going to do this thing. It was because of a higher power to which she owed allegiance; it was from a deeper and more delicate sense of the relations of things that she resolved to order her life—not according to her wishes, but accord-



ing to her view of certain eternal laws. And for the sake of a divine love, which reached to the man she almost hated as well as to the man she loved, she was strong enough to sacrifice herself.

There came suddenly to her mind the memory of a picture that she had seen in Florence; it had often seemed like a strong tower of defence, the impression made upon her had been so keen. It was Botticelli's *Fortezza*, the image of a woman, strongly pained yet passive, strangely quiet and placid, as if she waited and watched for things that were yet to come. It was not the picture of Fortitude as she would have imagined it; she would have painted rather the endurance of pain or shame; but this woman has apparently nothing to bear. She sits throned in high places,

strong and patient, watchful, self-reliant, wise. All the ills of the world may come upon her, but she will not thereby be disturbed. She knows all things, and knows that there is *nothing too hard to bear*. This was what the picture said to Cecily, and she saw herself in the pictured woman's place, not as an allegory, but as a live woman, bearing and enduring all things until the end.

She left the chapel at length and went back to the Castello, bent upon putting her resolve into action that very day. She would write to Mr Walrond—write to her husband even; and if Anthony were ill, if he wanted her back, if there seemed to be any need of her, she would return to London and take up her old place at his side. She would do what

she could to make her life with him more tolerable — she could do no more.

She entered the house from the garden, mounting the steps to her sitting-room with a step so soft and listless that she scarcely disturbed the green lizard sunning himself upon the wall. As she reached the door she fancied she heard a sound, a rustle. She started and paused for a moment. Could it be possible that someone was occupying her room? Yes. She caught sight of a figure on the couch—a man with a newspaper in his hand. It must be some stranger who had entered her sitting-room in mistake, thinking it to be one of the rooms used by the general public! He would have to be politely, but firmly, ejected.

Thus, with a half smile of apology upon

her lips, Cecily pushed upon the glass door, stepped into the room and found herself face to face with her husband, Anthony Marchmont.

## VII

*'—Where stands the Arch Fear in a visible form—'*

ROBERT BROWNING.

CECILY could not restrain a cry. She turned very pale and stood looking at her husband with strangely dilated eyes, as if she could not believe the testimony of her senses. As for him, he laughed—and his wife shrank as if he had struck her when she heard that laugh.

'Taken you by surprise, have I not?' said Anthony Marchmont, throwing down his newspaper and making a movement as if to rise, but falling back again as if rising were difficult. There was em-

barrassment and agitation in his laugh, but it struck cruelly upon Cecily's ear.

She could not speak. She stood and looked at him, with the air—just for a moment or two—of an animal at bay. She looked as if she might, next instant, turn and fly. The colour had not returned to her cheeks.

The silence told upon Anthony Marchmont's sensibilities. A dull red stole into his haggard face. He laid his hand upon the back of a chair and seemed to struggle by its help to his feet. It was plain that it *was* difficult to him to rise. And Cecily watched him in silence, conscious of a subtle change in him that she did not understand.

He was nearly twenty years her senior. She was taller than he, so much taller that he would have looked rather insig-

nificant beside her but for a certain swagger, a sort of importance in his air, a breadth of shoulder which redeemed his want of stature. He had possessed a measure of good looks when he was in his prime; he had good features, though somewhat blunt and commonplace, rather fine dark eyes, and curiously white and beautiful hands of which he was proud, keeping them with scrupulous care, adorning them with valuable rings, and using them a good deal to emphasise his speech.

Cecily used to feel sometimes as if she rather hated his hands. But he was certainly changed.

For one thing, he had been in the habit of dressing with as much elaborateness as London fashion would permit. He was always smart, well brushed, well groomed in every respect; but now,

Cecily noticed, with amaze, there was a look of carelessness about his clothes. They were dusty and rumpled, and hung upon him in a loosely-fitting way which struck her as remarkable. His sandy-coloured hair, thinner on the crown than it used to be, and the slight fair whiskers looked limp and rough; if they had been darker they would have shown more than a touch of grey. The face had a pinched and sunken appearance, and there were hollows in the temples and bags beneath the eyes. The man had suddenly grown old.

‘You have been ill, Anthony?’ she said quickly.

He nodded. ‘I’m ill now,’ he answered, with a look into her face. He gasped a little for breath, and put his hand to his side. ‘That walk—from the station—



has tired me. I thought you wouldn't mind my resting—in your room—for a little while.'

'Where else should you rest?' said Cecily, but it cost her something to say the words. 'Do sit down again—put up your feet; let me ring for some tea—or wine, if you prefer it, you look quite exhausted.'

She was almost thankful to have to speak of his bodily condition; it made everything easier. Yet the thought would force itself upon her, Why had he come? and what did he want of her?'

'Thank you,' he said, with unaccustomed meekness, and dropped back upon the sofa, as if the effort he had made had been too much for him. 'I have had some wine. I don't want anything more. But, if you want tea, don't let me hinder

you. I don't suppose I should hinder you,' he said, with a queer little laugh. 'You generally took your own way, did you not? But it sounded more polite to say so.'

Cecily's head took a turn which he remembered very well, although he did not seem to be looking at her; and it was in a colder tone that she said, very quietly,—

'I will ring for my tea, then. I am thirsty; but, if you do not want any, I can take it in my own room and leave you to rest.' She turned towards the door. It was not the way in which she had dreamed of meeting her husband; but the old flood of resentment at his sneering tone (for so it seemed to her) rose within her and carried away the landmarks of her resolution. She was

bitterly conscious that he could still irritate her as much as he had ever done. But his next words took her by surprise.

‘I’m a damned unlucky fellow in what I say,’ he remarked ruefully. ‘I know I always put your back up; but I didn’t mean to do it to-day. I came—for another reason.’

‘Oh,’ said Cecily. Then, conscious of the coldness of that monosyllable, ‘You wanted something?’

It was the last thing she meant to say. She knew that there was irony in her tone. She awaited her husband’s rejoinder with some shrinking. She knew that he generally had the best of it in a war of words. Her heart sank within her to think that they had so soon began to wrangle. She had hoped for

better things when they should meet again.

But Anthony Marchmont did not answer her angrily. There was almost a wistful note in his voice as he spoke.

‘Well, yes, I wanted something,’ he said, leaning back on the one cushion that the couch afforded him, ‘else I wouldn’t have intruded on your solitude. But it will keep. There is no need for me to tell you what I came for until you have had your tea—only I must get it out before long, or I shall go away with it unsaid.’

‘Go away,’ repeated Cecily, in astonishment. ‘But now that you have come so far, you will stay, will you not? You did not come’—laughing a little nervously—‘all the way from England to pay me an afternoon call?’

'I don't know,' he answered oddly—he was decidedly odd, she thought, that afternoon. 'I may want to go very soon. I don't know what I mean to do. I—I'm not very well, you see. I can't make hard and fast plans for myself just now.'

His wife's heart smote her. She spoke in a much softer tone.

'I am sorry to see you are not well, Anthony. Can I not do something for you? Let me get you a pillow. You will lie easier. Perhaps you would like to go to sleep.'

He shook his head. 'No, I don't want to sleep. But I'll stay here quietly for a little time, and then—when you've taken off your hat and had your tea—perhaps you'll come and hear what I have to say. It won't take long.'

He closed his eyes and turned his head away. Cecily went without a word. She thought she knew the significance of that knitted brow and hard set mouth; she had noticed it before as the precursor to some new outburst of irritability or displeasure, and she was glad to escape before it manifested itself. Yet, she reflected, the look on his face, as well as the attitude into which he had dropped, seemed to speak of depression and lassitude rather than anger. Doubtless his illness weighed upon him; illness is seldom borne patiently by a man. She wondered what ailed him, and felt vaguely uneasy. But, with the old habit of submission, she went to her room, took off her hat and drank the tea which Cesira brought her, and listened absently to Cesira's exclamations concerning the gentleman in the

sitting-room, the gentleman who said he was the husband of the Signora, and had just arrived from England.

‘I almost wish he had not said he was my husband,’ Cecily thought, when Cesira had disappeared. ‘It will look so odd to these simple people if he goes away again directly, as he is sure to do, though, of course, I might go with him,’ she added, doubtfully. It was strangely difficult to do the things of which she had dreamed that very afternoon, with the sound of the Vallombrosa in her ears, and the blue sky gleaming through the windows of Giovanni Gualberto’s chapel. The words of the prayer came back to her, but they seemed a great way off. ‘La grazia che io porti volentieri quella Croce che il mio Dio avrà determinato che porti;’ and the cross lay before her, at her very feet. She had

only to stoop and pick it up, and, alack for the weakness of human nature—she was not so inclined.

She came back to her sitting-room at last; she knew that she ought to be with her husband, and she felt a miserable distaste for his company. It was wrong—she knew it was wrong—but what could she do. If only he had not taken her so suddenly; if only she had been prepared.

She found him sitting beside the window in a low, straight-backed chair, and she expressed some surprise at his having risen from the sofa.

‘I’m often more comfortable in this position than lying down,’ he replied. Then looking at her curiously, he said, ‘You don’t ask what has been wrong with me; perhaps you know?’



‘I don’t know. I was wondering,’ said Cecily, flushing at the question. ‘Mr Walrond mentioned that you were unwell a short time ago, but he did not say what was the matter.’

‘Poor old Walrond! Yes, he was disappointed,’ said Anthony, with a mirthless laugh. ‘He thought that you would be alarmed and would come flying from the other side of Europe, and nurse me; but he need not have troubled himself. You were wise, you took no notice.’

Cecily gripped the back of a chair, as if to steady herself, and mentally girded up her loins for conflict.

‘I thought of you a great deal, Anthony,’ she said. ‘You have no right to say that I took no notice. I was wondering—I was intending to write to you—’

She got no further, for she felt utter-

ance rather difficult, and her husband did not seem inclined to wait for her to finish her broken sentences.

‘It is perhaps a good thing you didn’t,’ he said. ‘Letters are often misleading—unsatisfactory. Anything we have to say to each other will generally keep.’

‘Yes,’ said Cecily, blankly. The old cynical tone, the slight roughnesses of his speech, distressed her. He did not seem to want sympathy. She wondered a little why he had come out to her at all. ‘I am glad you are better now,’ she said, trying to speak cheerfully.

‘Better?’ He looked at her again in that odd way—she thought she read a sort of suspicion in his glance—and smiled, showing his teeth between his pale lips with a wolfish effect which she did not altogether like. ‘Oh, yes, I

suppose, I may say that I am better,' he added reflectively, as if doubting whether to agree with her or not. 'A month ago I could not have managed this journey; in fact, a month ago, I was in bed. So that I suppose I may call myself—better.'

'Was it influenza?'

'No, it was not influenza.'

He sat silent for a moment or two, his head stooping, his eyes fixed upon vacancy. He looked dull, old, depressed. Cecily felt a vague fear of what was coming next.

'Look here!' he said at last—and behind the roughness of his voice she felt that there was a quaver, a thrill, as of some half-hidden agitation—'I have something to tell you, and I must get it over. It is—somehow—a difficult thing to say.'

'Why need you tell me now?' said

Cecily. 'You are tired; let it wait until to-morrow.'

'Oh, no, I can't let it wait. I—I wouldn't stay the night here without telling you. Because—it's the only explanation I can give for my appearance. Otherwise, you might think my coming was a mere impertinence—almost an insult.'

She listened wonderingly. The breaks in his sentences struck her more than the words themselves. This difficulty in speaking, this strange embarrassment took her by surprise. She had never seen her husband in this mood before. She seated herself quietly and looked at him, waiting for him to proceed. She really did not know what to say, for he had expressed exactly the thought that lay at the bottom of her heart, namely, that unless he had a very good reason for

coming, his descent upon her was, as he had called it, 'an impertinence.' He was her husband; yes, but they had parted by mutual consent. She would never have sought *him* out, without giving him due notice.

She noticed that he had turned very white about the lips. He put up his hand to one side of his face, as if to hide the twitching of a muscle which showed that he was moved. She was sorry for him, but she could say nothing to allay his agitation, or to arrest the words upon his lips. Dimly she supposed that he was going to confess to some wrongdoing, perhaps to ask her to divorce him—perhaps, even, to make her some poor kind of apology. She could have smiled at the thought if it had not been painful as well as ludicrous.

Well, let him speak. He must say what was in his nature to say, she reflected drearily. He could not go outside himself. She was sorry that it should pain him to speak, but everybody must dree his own weird, and the sooner he got the thing out, whatever it was, the better for him. She waited silently, wishing that she did not feel so cold and hard, hoping that she did not look as she felt.

‘It’s just this,’ said Anthony Marchmont, hoarsely, ‘I’m a dying man.’

A cry broke from her lips. She had not expected this. She was shocked, horrified, incredulous.

‘Anthony! don’t say such a foolish thing!’ She could not help speaking sharply in that first moment of shock and surprise.

His face was very grey, and as he

lowered his hand—for the muscle twitched no longer—she saw that it was trembling. Perhaps the shaking of his hand brought more conviction to her mind than words would have done.

She leaned forward, and put her hand on his knee. 'You don't mean it, Anthony? You are ill, you are depressed, but you will soon feel better in this lovely air. Oh, I am glad you came to Italy—to me—when you felt so ill. I will nurse you, and you will get stronger by-and-by.'

She was perfectly sincere. She did not love him, perhaps, as a husband should be loved; but her sympathies went out to him at once when he was in want of help and comfort. The motherliness in her, the motherliness of all good women, wakened at a touch,

and she felt ready to take him into her heart as an ailing child.

‘Thank you, Cecily,’ said the man, simply. The cynicism was gone from his voice now: he spoke in a low monotone, which seemed to his wife to express great weakness, and consequent fatigue. She listened in a new way, with her senses all quickened and alert, as he continued, ‘It is like you to take it in that way. I didn’t know, but I half fancied that you would be capable of feeling a little sorry—even for me. It’s—kind of you!’

‘Anthony, I should be very hard and cruel if I were not sorry. But, surely, it can’t be true! Who has said such a thing to you? or is it only, perhaps, what you yourself think, because you feel ill and weak—’



'I've had three doctors, and they all say the same thing,' said Anthony Marchmont. 'It's an aneurism of the aorta. You don't understand what that is, do you? Well, I didn't myself at first, but they explained it to me very carefully when they found that I was determined to know, so I can repeat exactly what they said.'

He went into a few details, given with such perfect lucidity that Cecily felt her breath taken away, and he mentioned the names of the doctors that had been consulted—some of the most famous names in medical science of our time. 'So,' he concluded at last, almost gently, 'you see there's no hope for me.'

'How *can* they be sure?' said Cecily, her eyes filling with tears.

It was the tragedy of it that made her

cry—the sadness of seeing a man doomed, in the very prime of life, without hope of a reprieve. Anthony seemed to know this, and he smiled as he looked at her.

‘They speak confidently at anyrate. I suppose auscultation tells a good deal. It’s rather rough on a man to be brought up suddenly like this, isn’t it? I’m not fifty yet; I thought I was good for at least another twenty years, but it will soon be over now.’

‘If you take great care—’

‘If I take great care, I can prolong my days for a few weeks, or months, I daresay. Six months at the outside, they give me. It may be six weeks—or six days, for aught I know. Oh, no, not so soon as that!’ he added, hastily, seeing a look of terror in Cecily’s eyes.

‘I shall be worse than this before the

end comes, I suppose. I can manage to shuffle along pretty comfortably for the present.'

But he did not speak quite sincerely. The doctors had told him that death might come at any moment, and there was no reason to think that he would appear worse in health than he was at present up to his last moment. But he would not say so to his wife. He did not want to frighten her unduly. Besides, he meant to leave Vallombrosa on the morrow and betake himself to a quiet spot near one of the Italian lakes; he liked hot weather, and he did not want Cecily to be with him when he died.

'I thought it was all up with me a few weeks ago,' he said, with a queer smile. 'I overdid myself, and I got some nasty attacks of pain. The doctors made me

take to my bed, and kept me a prisoner much longer than I liked. You see, they said the only chance for me was perfect rest and quiet, and for days I was forbidden almost to move.'

'And I never knew. I would have come to you, Anthony, if I had known.'

'I didn't want you to take that trouble. I never meant Walrond to say as much as he did—though, fortunately, you did not attach much importance to his communication—'

'Anthony, don't say that,' said Cecily, earnestly. She left her chair, and knelt on the floor beside him, looking up into his face with beseeching eyes. 'Of course I did not guess that you were so ill; but I thought and wondered very much whether you would care to have me with you; and I came home this very after-

noon, intending to write to you and to ask you whether you would like me to come back—'

'Ah! I forestalled you, then,' said Anthony. 'Well—I am glad I did. I have not told you yet why I came. You don't suppose I travelled all this way simply to give you the news of my approaching decease?'

The mocking tone was in his voice again. Cecily drew back. It jarred upon her to hear him speak in his old jesting way, and she hardly realised as yet that a good deal of sober and solemn meaning lay behind it.

'What is it?' she asked, in a low voice.

'Well . . . get up, Cecily, I don't like to see you there. Sit down and let me talk to you a moment, if you will. . . .

It's just this: I did not like to go out of the world without telling you that I know I've been a brute to you. I think that's chiefly what I wanted to say.'

There was a short pause. Cecily's eyes were fixed on his face as though something in it fascinated her; she could not turn them away. As for him, he moved uneasily, and she saw the beads of perspiration start out on his pallid face. He went on with nervous haste.

'It isn't much good saying that one is sorry, I know that; yet I had the feeling—I thought I should like you to know that I did understand how badly I had treated you. I knew all the time—but something led me on. And now it is too late to make any amends—'

'Oh, no, no, it is not too late,' cried Cecily, with tears. 'You make amends

by telling me all this. I am so glad to know that you feel in this way—so thankful! Anthony, I have not always been a good wife to you; but now let us be together as much as we can. I will nurse you and take such care of you that perhaps you will get quite well after all—'

'That is impossible,' said Anthony. 'I shall never get well.'

'Then,' said Cecily, her voice sinking, 'at anyrate, let us be together—till—the end.'

'Does that mean that you can forgive me, Cecily?'

'Oh, it does, indeed. And forgive me, too, Anthony—Anthony—'

'I have nothing to forgive,' said Anthony. 'There—there, my dear; don't cry like that, there's nothing for you to

cry about.' He took her hand and held it gently in his own as he spoke. 'I've been a bad husband to you, and you will be well rid of me. I shall be better out of your way. Perhaps you will find somebody who will make you happier when I am gone.'

'Anthony—'

A confession trembled on her lips. But he went on unheeding; he was absorbed in his own train of thought and did not notice the trouble in her eyes.

'I don't know what impelled me to come out to you. I set my heart on coming as soon as the doctors told me what was wrong. I had a feeling—a silly sort of feeling—came from illness—I dare say—that I could not go out into the next world without seeing you first and telling you that I wished I had



behaved differently. I know it is a futile sort of thing to do: one of a sick man's fancies, so you must put up with it.'

'I am so glad you came,' said Cecily.

'But you must not think I mean to bother you long, you know. I left my traps at Florence—down at the *Nord*. I thought that, if you did not mind my staying a night or so—they seem to have plenty of room here—'

'Of course you will stay. Why need you hurry away?'

'I thought you mightn't like it. I might be in your way?'

'You could not be in my way as long as there is anything I can do for you.'

'You're a good woman, Cecily,' said her husband; and then he lay back with a look of rest and peace which made his

face very different from the one which she remembered in the London days.

‘You are talking too much; you are tired.’

‘No, it’s nothing; I feel better now. I was thinking of going on to Caddenabbia, or some of those places, in a day or two. They are very quiet in the summer-time, and these doctor fellows say I want quiet.’

‘Then, why not stay here? Do you think you would not like the place?’

‘It seems well enough; but they tell me the summer visitors will be coming soon, and that they kick up an awful row.’

‘But when they come we can go away to Caddenabbia, or wherever you like.’

‘*We?*’ he repeated, in a bewildered voice. ‘But you won’t care to come?’

'Do you think I should let you go away alone when you are ill? Oh, Anthony, let me do whatever I can for you. I shall be so glad, so thankful, if I can be of any use or comfort to you now, after all those dreary years.'

He yielded the point, with a sort of wonder in his eyes. He had meant to keep her away from him; he had quite made up his mind to die alone, in some quiet place, where she would not even know that he was dead until he had been laid in his grave. His man, who had come with him, had all his instructions, and knew exactly what to do. It had never entered his mind that Cecily would beg to be near him, or that he would feel her presence a help and consolation. Yet, now that they had met,

now that he had confessed his sense of wrong-doing and received her forgiveness, he knew that he did not want her to leave him. If he must go down into the valley of the Shadow of Death, he was glad to think that she would go with him, as far as possible, hand-in-hand. He turned his weary face to hers, and his eyes rested gratefully on her tender, sorrowing face.

‘Cecily,’ he said, ‘will you kiss me—again?’

She bent her lips to his, and as they met she became conscious that the old repulsion had fallen away from her, that the sense of injury and resentment was gone. It was not merely her husband’s acknowledgment of wrong-doing that had dispelled the cloud: it was rather the solemnising thought of the approach of

death, which brought with it a memory of Gualberto's chapel and the cross which she had promised that she would bear.

Husband and wife talked little as they sat together that evening, but they had a sense of reunion, which was peaceful and pleasant to both of them. They lingered by the open window until the moon came up and threw its silvery light over the scene, and then they walked for a little while up and down the garden-walks, in the absolute stillness of the summer night. The shadows seemed strangely dark and well defined in the white moonlight; the balustrades of the house, the projecting roof, the stone steps, were sharply outlined in shadow and light. Overhead, the moon, proud and bare as Godiva, rode in a

desert sky, and the faint stars seemed to be extinguished by her brilliant presence. The sounds that could be heard were just sufficient to make the wide silences more intense. There was a rustle of wind in the small trees planted on the edge of the terrace, and the crickets were chirping sleepily in the grass. A dog barked in a far-off farm, and there was a rushing sound in the pine wood, and the murmur of a torrent stream among the trees. In all the wide, dim landscape there was no gleam of light, no sign of human existence anywhere. Anthony Marchmont looked round him, and shivered a little as he looked.

‘You are cold,’ said Cecily, anxiously.  
‘Let us go in.’

‘I am not cold,’ he answered. ‘I was wondering where I should be next year

at this time: that was all. I think it would be easy to die in a place like this. One feels oneself in the next world already.'

## VIII

*'It is a greater miracle to convert a soul . . . than to raise  
a body from the dead.'*

SAINT GREGORY.

ANTHONY settled down quickly and comfortably at the Castello d'Acquabella. He spoke no more of going to Caddenabbia, sent for his servant and his luggage, and made himself at home. The soft summer air, the Italian sunlight, the gentle presence of Cecily seemed to do him good. He gained flesh and colour, improved in spirits, took an interest in the passing visitors, walked and talked until his wife was amazed and thought that the doctors must have made a mistake in their



diagnosis of the disease; but he did not think so. Now and then he dropped a word which startled her, showing, as it did, that the thought of death recurred to him very often—was perhaps always present in his mind—that he had accepted the doctors' decision as a fact, and believed his life would not be much prolonged.

Cecily could not believe it. But the possibility exerted its effect and made it easier for her to accommodate herself to her husband's tastes, which had not always been her own. Anthony had not been suddenly changed into a saint or a hero, and his faults were, perhaps, very much what they had always been; but Cecily did not now find them impossible to bear. He still sneered sometimes at things that she revered. He was occasionally irritable,

exacting, bad tempered, but pity had risen up within her and dominated her soul—pity, which made it an essay thing to bear, to forbear, almost, in fine, to love.

And, although not miraculously transformed, Anthony Marchmont was a somewhat different man from the one that Cecily had known. He was gentler and more affectionate than in days of old, and a new vein of reflectiveness showed itself sometimes, more in harmony with Cecily's way of thinking than she could have imagined. He took pleasure in little things, in watching the gardener's children picking flowers among the grass, in listening to Cecily's attempts at Italian conversation with Adriano or Cesira, in sitting by and smoking lazily while she arranged the wild flowers from the woods. Perhaps the lassitude of illness had some-

thing to do with his pleasure in trifles. To Cecily it was something new and wonderful.

‘I never saw such wild flowers,’ he said one day. ‘How many kinds have you found?’

She laughed at the question. It was impossible to say, she answered, for she was not a botanist, and did not know the names of half the flowers she saw. But she showed him her diary—it was a great mark of confidence, and Anthony was pleased—wherein she had noted down the order and succession of the flowers that she knew by name.

First the spring flowers, anemone and violet; then the star of Bethlehem and Solomon’s seal; then campion and cranesbill and strawberry blossom, followed by pansy and buttercup. On June 15th, the tall, white flower, something like meadow-

sweet, had just been observed; on the 9th she plucked a cuckoo-flower and noted great clumps of lupins and Canterbury bells. About the middle of June, too, the pink spikes of the orchids brightened the open glades, and the running waters were fringed with forget-me-nots. At the time when Anthony arrived the dog-roses were beginning to open, and she had seen honeysuckle in the woods. Summer and summer flowers were coming fast, and the garden was sweet with odours from the syringa hedges, which blossomed in wild profusion at every turn. The land was awake and alive and warm in the sunshine. It was hard, as Anthony said one day, with wistful eyes, to have to leave it so soon—so very soon.

And when Cecily, almost against her will, whispered a word concerning her be-

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lief in a better country, a celestial city, or those 'hills of heaven' to which we look and where we hope to win, he only shook his head with a half-sad, half-cynical smile.

He was strong enough to take short and easy walks with his wife, and they went together along the roads, avoiding the hills as much as possible, and resting sometimes on a mossy wall or a pile of logs by the wayside. He took an interest in the old convent buildings, and went once or twice into the church, but found the place cold, and shrugged his shoulders over its tawdry decorations and musty relics. The place that he wanted to see was the monastery itself, now used as a school of forestry; and one day, when he seemed extremely well and active, they went together to the fine old entrance,

with its quaint courtyard and flight of steps, and asked to be shown over the building, or over as much of it as was open to the public.

The custodian was delighted to show it. He conducted them to the kitchen, where they saw a curious old stone erection, where four fires could be lighted at once, and which was arched over like an antique well. He showed them the old refectory, now turned into a theatre, where the students act plays for their own delight and that of their friends. He showed them the library, despoiled of its ancient glories, since the fine old missals and music books have been carried off to Florentine museums. 'Wisdom hath builded herself an house,' is the superscription over the library portals. It looks almost like a satire on the changes that have taken

place in the old monastery; for wisdom does not always live with science, and the monks who raised these walls never dreamt of a day when they would be used only for earthly learning, and all religious life and lore be sped.

‘It is not very interesting,’ said Anthony, glancing rather contemptuously at the specimens of wood, the stuffed animals and the coiled snakes in spirits of wine. ‘It reminds one of Kew.’

‘One regrets the monks,’ said Cecily. ‘Their ghosts must walk sometimes.’

She looked down the long, wide corridor, on either side of which are the students’ bedrooms: they used to be the monks’ cells in days of old. One or two of the young men hovered in and out of the tiny rooms, casting curious glances at the English visitors. Now and then one

of them would be heard clattering down the stone stairs, or raising the echoes by wild shouts of youth and joyousness.

‘I should not like to sleep here,’ said Cecily. ‘I am sure the monks walk up and down the corridor at night.’

‘You are growing nervous,’ said Anthony, with a laugh. ‘Come out into the sunshine before this place gets on your nerves.’

They went downstairs and out into the sunny courtyard ; but Anthony was tired, and said that he would go into the church and rest, while Cecily paid a visit to the post-office and bought stamps.

She transacted her business as quickly as possible, and hastened to join him, for she never liked leaving him alone ; but at first, when she entered the church,



she could not find him, and it took her some moments to discover that he had passed up the chancel steps and turned into the little side-chapel dedicated to San Giovanni Gualberto. She found him standing in the middle of the chapel, looking curiously at the picture of Gualberto before the crucifix.

‘Who’s that old fellow?’ he asked, irreverently. Reverence was not his strong point.

Cecily was almost annoyed. The little chapel had grown so dear, the memory of Gualberto meant so much to her, that she felt as if the place were profaned by the idle question and the mocking spirit which impelled it.

However, she knew that her feeling was overstrained and somewhat foolish. So she brought herself to give her hus-

band an outline of Gualberto's story, and to remind him of San Miniato and of the many pictures of Gualberto that are to be seen in the galleries of Florence. Anthony made no comment, but he listened, with a certain interest, to the story before he turned away.

Then he sat down on one of the seats, took up the framed and printed prayer, and called upon Cecily to translate the Italian to him. The words seemed to strike him more than the story had done.

'Protector of the dying! Now, I wonder why,' he remarked, philosophically, when she had given him some notion of the prayer. 'It's not a bad idea to have a saint or an angel to look after you in your dying moments.—you certainly can't do much for yourself just then. If I could ever have

brought myself to the point, I think I should like to have been a Catholic. The Catholic Church has a curious way of going straight to the hearts or men.'

She had seldom heard him speak so seriously, and she was surprised to see that his eyes rested for some time upon the words to which her fingers happened to be pointing, 'Abbate, Signore, misericordia di noi nel punto della nostra morte.' 'In the hour of our death,' she heard him repeat to himself, 'in the hour of our death.'

She drew him gently away, thinking it bad for him to dwell upon this thought of death; but all her efforts did not avail to make him anything but grave and rather absent-minded for the rest of the day. It was towards

dusk that evening that he felt more inclined to talk.

‘I was thinking over that story you told me in the chapel this afternoon,’ he said, suddenly; ‘the story of that Gualberto, or whatever his name is, and I fancy I’ve read something like it somewhere or other.’

Cecily mentioned the romance in which a similar incident occurred.

‘Ah! that’s it,’ he said, as it relieved. ‘But that turns out differently — more naturally, as I should have imagined. The man is spared, but not exactly forgiven: he is given over to judgment, or something of that kind. Now, Gualberto is said in the story to have forgiven his brother’s murderer completely.’

‘Yes, and it is a beautiful story,’ said Cecily.

'I should like to know how that chap felt,' said Anthony Marchmont, reflectively. 'The man that was forgiven, you know, not Gualberto, who had all the credit and comfort of doing a good action. The other man must have felt himself such a mean hound!'

He stopped, and looked straight at Cecily for a moment or two.

'I think I feel something like that with you,' he said.

'Dear Anthony—'

'Don't protest,' he said, smiling faintly. 'I never thought a woman could forgive as you have done. I never thought you would be so good to me. I came here in a queer mood, intending to acknowledge that I had treated you badly, and then to go off and never see you again. I had not the least idea of

inflicting myself upon you as I have done.'

'You must not talk of "inflicting" yourself upon me. I am your wife: no one else has a right to be near you when you are ill.'

'It is a right some women are not so eager to insist on. No, I never expected it. I did not come cringing to you for what I could get, like a hungry dog that wants a bone. I was not so bad as that.'

'What made you come?' she asked, feeling that he wanted her to ask the question.

'Well, I scarcely know. I was never a man who cared for the serious side of things. I didn't take it into account. I wanted as much enjoyment as I could get out of life, and I thought I could

put off the question of right and wrong — of religion and that sort of thing, you know, until the end of my life. It was good for old folks and women and children, I supposed.' He spoke hesitatingly, blunderingly, as one speaks of a subject that one has never approached before. 'Things seem different when you look death in the face, especially when you are not old and would like to see more of the world before you die. You begin to wonder whether death is the end of everything, or whether you've got to go through the mill again in some other kind of world.'

'I think we go on to higher things,' said Cecily.

'Yes, *you* think so; but some other people don't. I don't know what to think

myself. There seems no assurance about anything. It's a step in the dark.'

'But we need not mind the dark, when the great Father holds us by the hand,' cried Cecily, the tears rushing to her eyes. If only she could give him the faith which was as an anchor to her own soul! But it has been written that 'no man can deliver his brother's soul, nor make agreement with God for him.'

'Ah, yes, I know what you mean,' said Anthony, quietly. 'But — you see, even supposing that I believe in your great Father—and perhaps I do, I'm not sure—even then, I haven't troubled Him all my life, and there is a certain sort of meanness in appealing to Him now.'

'You came to me when you thought you had done me a wrong,' said Cecily. 'Why not go to Him in the same way?'



Not for what you can get, as you said just now, but because you owe Him that acknowledgment of wrong-doing. Then let Him do as He pleases. You say that you never expected me to forgive you; you expected me to let you go away and be ill—perhaps die—all alone: you seem to have been surprised that I should be pleased and ready to do all I could for you—’

‘By Jove, so I was!’ exclaimed her husband. ‘And I am still.’

‘Well,’ said Cecily, ‘don’t you expect God to be better to you than I was?’

‘Upon my soul, I don’t know,’ said Anthony.

‘You can’t really and seriously think that He would take no notice,’ she went on, with increasing earnestness. ‘When He sees you turning back to Him—climb-

ing up the heights, as it were—just as you came here to me, hoping for nothing, only anxious to say “I was wrong; I am sorry”—don’t you think that He will be ready, far more ready than I, to hold out His arms, to welcome you back, to lead you through the darkness to His own home of eternal love? You cannot doubt; you know what love is, and you know that His love for us must be greater than any love we have for each other.’

‘You put it in a new way,’ said Anthony, sighing. ‘I’ll think of that. It’s something to hold by.’

‘You can hold by His hand,’ said Cecily.

‘Well! But I don’t want to cringe, to lose my manhood, even before Him. I should like to tell Him that I’m ready to take what I deserve, that I don’t want

to be let off—or, at least, it isn't for that that I turn to Him. I'm not on the orthodox track, you see, Cecily. I feel as I should feel to someone whom I had wronged or insulted. I owe Him an apology: that's all.'

'When you find Him so ready to meet you half way, I think you will have no difficulty,' said Cecily. 'I believe most of us us repent properly *after* we are forgiven, and not before.'

'You have grown very wise—up here in Vallombrosa,' he said, looking at her with wondering tenderness. 'You never used to talk like this. Who has been teaching you?'

She smiled a little. 'Giovanni Gualberto, I sometimes think,' she said. Then, after a pause, 'In these beautiful solitudes, it seems to me easier to listen to a Divine

voice than in the bustle of a great city. These woods and hills have seemed more full of God's presence than many a church I have visited; and I have learnt more from the winds and the clouds and the sunshine than from any book I have ever read. This may seem fanciful to you; but I think that God teaches different people in so many different ways, that it is perhaps not wonderful if now and then He lets us learn our lessons from the world He has made, instead of from the words of other men.'

'Yes, that may be so. As for me, I'm content to learn from you, Cecily.'

He held out his hand for hers, and carried it to his lips. Cecily's eyes again filled with tears—tears of pity, of tenderness, of remorse. A great flood of affection rose in her heart, drowning all

regret, all coldness, all lingering soreness of feeling; she was desirous of nothing now but that there should be no shadow between her husband and herself. For she knew that it was only through her love that he could be led home to God.

‘I have had another teacher,’ she said, kneeling beside him and folding both her hands over his thin fingers, as she looked steadily into his eyes: ‘my own need of forgiveness.’

‘Yours,’ he said. ‘A white-souled woman like you scarcely knows what the need of forgiveness means.’

But she went on, without faltering. ‘I need your forgiveness, Anthony.’

‘Mine?’

‘I must tell you. I have thought that I ought to tell you ever since you came,

but I have not had the courage. But now—now—'

'Wait one moment,' said her husband hoarsely. He took away his hand and raised himself a little in his chair. 'I don't think you need tell me. I suppose—you mean—you have loved another man?'

'Anthony, don't look like that, don't speak as if I had done you any wrong—except in my heart, for a little while—when I thought you had abandoned me. It was then—when I was so miserable—'

'Tell me,' he said, his eyes fixed on her face, down which the tears were dropping fast. 'Let me hear the worst of it. Who was the man?'

The softness had gone from his eyes: they were fierce and suspicious under his

dark bent brows. Cecily's heart beat thick and fast; had she undone all her work, lost all her influence with him, through the admission that her conscience had impelled her to make?

‘Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra.’

She would do her best.

‘It was my fault,’ she said bravely. ‘I let my friends in Florence think that I was a widow. I never said so, but they took up the idea, and my pride would not let me tell them that I had a husband in England—a husband who did not care for me. And so it happened that a man there thought I was free to be his wife.’

‘And asked you?’

‘Not in Florence. When I saw what was happening, I came away to Vallombrosa. I thought I should never see him

again. I did not tell him where I was going; but he found out.'

'Ah? And came here, I suppose?'

'Yes, he came,' said Cecily, slowly and clearly, 'and I told him the truth.'

'You told him that you were a married woman?'

'Yes.'

'And then, I suppose—' he spoke with great difficulty—'he asked you to go away with him?'

'No, you mistake. He did nothing of the kind. He is a good man. He told me to do right: to forget him, to think of other things, and I promised that I would. And then he went away, and I have not seen him again.'

'Where is he?'

'I do not know! I do not want to know!'



There was a silence. Then Anthony said in a very low tone, which had yet grown strangely calm—

‘But—you loved this man, Cecily?’

She winced; she covered her face with her hands, but she answered bravely, ‘Perhaps I did. I thought so. I was very lonely; very much in want of love. But it all seems far away now. And we were true to you, Anthony!’

She knelt, trembling, with her face still hidden, until there came, quite gently, the touch of a hand upon her head.

‘Good God!’ said Anthony. ‘To think that, after the life I’ve led, this woman should feel herself guilty to me because of a passing fancy for another man! Cecily, you make me blacker in my own eyes than I have ever felt myself yet!’

She looked up, scarcely understanding what he meant.

‘I gave you no reason to be true to me,’ he said. ‘You know—I told you in the old days—I never minced matters.’

‘Ah, don’t recall those days,’ she said. ‘You know I have forgiven them, even if you cannot say that you forgive me!’

‘There’s so much to forgive,’ he said, with the laugh which sometimes goes along with tears. ‘Poor child! I left you alone—you were not to blame. In your place, I suppose, I shouldn’t have resisted any temptation that came in my way.’

‘But, Anthony, there ought to have been no temptation!’

‘Yes, I know, to your pure soul even temptation looks like a crime. There, think no more of the past, Cecily, my wife. I know you have always been loyal

and good and true—a better wife no man could ever have; and I have been worse than a brute to you. God forgive me! I never felt the mud on me as I do now!

He was silent a little while, holding her hands tightly and leaning against her shoulder.

‘Kiss me, Cecily,’ he said at last.

She kissed him softly, and did not take her face away, but let her soft cheek still rest against his face.

‘You forgive me?’ she said.

‘Don’t humiliate me by asking my forgiveness, child. Is it possible that you can forgive *me*?—that you can care for me still—even a little bit?’

‘Anthony, I love you with all my heart,’

‘I think,’ he said dreamily, after a moment’s pause, ‘that you make me believe in a sort of large, divine, all-embracing

love more than I ever did before. Your forgiveness, Cecily, is an earnest, perhaps, of what one may meet when one least expects it. There's that old story about the man who went into a far country, and whose father ran to meet him when he came back, and fell on his neck and kissed him, although, I fancy, the prodigal expected only to be numbered with the servants—'

'This is my son . . . which was lost, and is found,' murmured Cecily.

'Yes. The story is a parable, I suppose. It's a very beautiful one, if it is true.'

Then silence fell between them, and they watched the stars come out one by one in the violet sky.

But when it was quite dark Anthony spoke in a hushed voice.

'Cecily, when I am gone—'

‘Don’t—don’t speak of it, Anthony!’

‘I must, my sweet, I want you to remember what I say. Will you promise me to remember?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well . . . remember, I should like to think of you as happy. I don’t know whether I shall know what you are doing; but if I know, I’m sure it will be a pleasure to me that you should have a happy life. So don’t turn away from any chance of happiness with the feeling that you would be wronging me, or doing what I should not like.’

She could not speak.

‘This man—that loved you,’ he began.

‘Anthony, I have put him out of my life for ever.’

‘Not for ever, I think, dear. If he is worthy of you, I hope he will come back

again, when I am gone, and make you his wife. Yes, I *hope* it. It will be better for you to marry, my dearest, and find some compensation for all I have made you endure. I should be a churl indeed if I grudged you any happiness in the future.' But his voice trembled a little. After all, it was hard—it was hard! And Cecily clung to him closely still.

'You do not think I could forget these days together?' she said. 'You have been to me so much more than ever before—'

'No, don't forget them,' he said tenderly. 'Don't forget me either. I should like you to think of me—to pray for me even, if you think prayers are of any use to the dead, to remember me with your sweet forgiveness and charity all the days of your life.'

'I shall never forget,' she murmured.

And she put away from her, once and for all, as she thought, all memories of the past, all stirrings of the heart, that had once been dear. The man she had loved was dead to her. She had no hope, no desire, save those that were bound up with the frail life of the man whom she did not love.

## I X

*'A great distress hath humanised my soul.'*

WORDSWORTH.

ST JOHN'S EVE had come. There would be a great festival in Florence on the day of her patron saint, and the streets would be bright with flags and flowers, and all the world would be out of doors in the sunshine. And on the eve of the great day there would be fireworks on the bridge and in the squares, and bonfires on all the hills around. A great day for Florence this festival of the Baptist, who had been as one crying in the wilderness in his lifetime, and is celebrated with flags and fireworks in Italy to this day. There



seemed to be a little incongruity in the nature of the rejoicings, to Cecily's mind.

'Oh, it's a national festival,' her husband said, when she made this remark to him. 'You must not be hard on Southern folk: they love a festival of any kind.'

There was a new brightness in his eye, a new spring in his step; ever since that memorable talk with Cecily he had been as a man revived and rejuvenescent. His laugh was ready, his speech was cheerful; he was not like the man who had come to Vallombrosa in those earlier days of June. Cecily, looking at him, took fresh hope and courage; her work had not been all in vain.

They began to talk of leaving Vallombrosa. He seemed so much better that he talked

of spending the summer in a cooler spot, and made plans with Cecily about the Italian lakes and the Black Forest. He had shaken off all his depression, but he still showed the traces of illness in his sharpened features and stooping frame, and a few words, dropped from time to time, proved that, although he spoke less of the doom which his doctors had foretold for him, he was not without sober thoughts of it. But he was taking a new interest in life, and that was in itself a gain. It sometimes seemed as though the heart of a boy had returned to him.

As the night fell he sat with his wife in the garden and watched the bonfires grow red upon the hills.

It is the relic of an old Pagan custom this lighting of fires upon the hills, and Cecily watched, with curiously fascinated

interest, as the red spark glowed on peak after peak of the serried Apennines, first one and then another starting into life, dying down again, reviving once more, like strange fireflies breathing and floating and shining in the dusky air. Cecily counted nearly fifty fires on different heights within range of her vision. And then in Florence, twenty miles away, the fireworks showed themselves, with a distant sound of thunder, and she almost wished herself among the cheerful crowds which must be jostling each other along the brightly lighted streets.

‘After all, they are not much to see,’ said Anthony, looking at the tiny, lamp-like flames. ‘I wish the bonfires were nearer, I should like to see how they build them. They don’t burn very well.’

‘The night is damp,’ said Cecily, ‘and

see the white mist rising in the valley. Perhaps we had better go indoors.'

'You had better go in, dear, you will catch cold. I am going to walk up the road with the *Direttore* a little way; he is going to show me the bonfires as seen from Saltino.'

'Shall I come too?'

'No, my darling, you are too tired. I will only go a little way; the old boy told me one had a marvellous view from the hill. Good-bye.' And he bent to kiss her as they parted at the door.

Cecily did not like it. She was always anxious about her husband when he was out of her sight, but she did not care to show her anxiety, as she saw that it sometimes fretted him. She consoled herself with the reflection that the *Direttore* was not a man who walked fast or far, and that he was

hardly likely to leave her husband quite alone. She went indoors and waited, watched the bonfires glow and fade and melt away into the darkness of the night. Before an hour was over they were nearly all gone.

Then a knock came to the door. She opened it hastily. In the loggia, hat in hand, stood the *Direttore*, quite alone. He spoke in French.

‘Monsieur has returned, no doubt?’ he inquired. Cecily distinguished a note of anxiety in his voice.

‘No, he has not returned. Was he not with you?’

‘Yes, madame, but I left him for one moment to speak to a workman, and when I returned to the spot where he was standing he was gone. He has probably gone down the hill a little way. I will go back

and look for him. Madame has no reason to alarm herself.'

He tried to retire, bowing, but Cecily detained him with half-a-dozen eager questions, to which he replied patiently and politely.

'No, monsieur had not seemed tired. He had been interested in the fires of St John the Baptist. He had not said that he would wait for the Director. It was to be presumed that monsieur must be here directly.'

And so on. And then he went upon his way, while Cecily watched him go, and followed him to the gate, with a dire foreboding of evil at her heart.

She waited and listened, but she heard no footstep on the road. She strained her eyes to see that nothing was visible in the darkness. She paced up and down the pathway, at first slowly, with frequent

pauses, then rapidly, as her anxiety increased and her nerves were more astrain. The bonfires on the hill were mostly extinct, or hidden by a creeping mist, but the lights of Florence glowed brightly, and the noise of the fireworks came distinctly to her ear through the silence of the night. She would never forget the silent misery that grew upon her through that weird Eve of St John.

For although she had never been 'in love,' as people call it, with her husband, she had of late grown into pity which was almost like love, which might, indeed, be classed as a very sincere affection, capable of greater endurance and greater patience than a more ardent kind of love. It was almost the love of a mother for her child, of a sister for a prodigal brother who had come home. And as the mother or the sister might have waited and agonised in suspense at

the disappearance of one who was to her dearer than all others, so Cecily waited and suffered for the sake of the man who had in old days cost her the supreme agony, the supreme renunciation, of her life.

And the lights went out in Florence, and the bonfires flamed no more, but higher and higher the constellations rose in the midnight sky, and sank and faded at the touch of dawn. But Anthony came not, although night waned and a new morning flushed the sky.

They sought for him long before they found him, where he lay in a green glade, whither he must have wandered after parting from the Director at Saltino. It was only a little way from the Castello, on the right of the road to Vallombrosa. Evidently he had stepped aside by a narrow path to look at the Florence fireworks, for



a good view of the distant city could be obtained at that point. And there had happened the thing that had been foretold, that he would fall suddenly and die without warning, without so much as a groan, perhaps, to show the sharpness of that last rending pang.

The morning light was full and splendid when they found him. One could see it over in Florence, reflected from a dozen points, like the flashing of great mirrors in the sun. It threw a golden light over the distant hills, where even the shadows looked startingly full of colour, and were violet and velvety, like the bloom upon a plum; it stole caressingly between the straight stems of the fir trees, which stood like solemn sentinels around a dead man's bier. He lay with his face turned upward to the ethereal blue of that Italian sky; one hand

thrown out among the tangled green grass and flowers, the other clutching his breast. There were great pink spikes of orchis and tall tufts of golden buttercups round him; a bird brushed him with its wings, a butterfly had settled on his cold hand. Everything breathed of sunshine, of summer, of a glorious luxuriance of life: he lay silent and cold. It was over for him, this world, and all its opportunities for good and ill; he had begun some new existence somewhere else — where, who knows?

Cecily was almost startled in the midst of her grief to find that he had carried about with him the scrap of paper which the sacristan had once given to her, on which was printed the prayer for the help of San Giovanni Gualberto in the hour of death. She remembered that it

had seemed to strike him curiously when she translated it. After all, whether a dying man were Roman or Anglican, whether saint or sinner, there could be no better prayer than the one which has been prayed so often in the solitudes of Vallombrosa,—

‘Abbate, Signore, misericordia di noi nel punto della nostra morte.’ — *Have mercy upon us, O Lord, in the hour of our death.*

Anthony Marchmont was carried to Florence and laid in a green grave, where great purple irises lift their stately blooms above him, as they do beside the stone of the woman singer who gave her heart to Italy. Cecily felt something like pleasure in considering that he lay in the hallowed soil of this lovely land, this home of beauty, this mother country

of all whose natures respond to the call of nature, love, art, religion—the master-words of all our being, the everlasting reminders that we are spiritual creatures, to whom the things of the spirit are the true realities of life.

So, even among faiths and modes of devotion which, at first sight, seem mouldering and outworn, Cecily, and perhaps also her husband, had found a new spring of living water, of motive and belief, such as the poet seems to hint at when he tells us how the old order gives place to the new,

‘And God fulfils Himself in *many* ways.’

Nearly two years later, Mrs Marchmont came again to Florence. In the meantime she had lived partly in London and partly abroad, seeing few people, and

knowing little of what went on in the world. She had avoided Italy, for there was necessarily much of pain connected with her memories of that 'land of souls ;' but, in the second spring after her husband's death, something drew her back to the Lily City, where the flowers were bursting into their first wild splendour, and the peach trees enveloped the town in a rosy cloud of bloom. She went to a quiet hotel, and did not introduce herself to her old friends. She was glad to go in silence to the dear, beautiful old churches, with their crowds of kneeling worshippers, and to linger, without words of comment, before her old favourite pictures in the galleries—the 'Fortitude,' the 'Madonna of the Magnificat,' the 'Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth' as painted by Albertinelli, or the lovely

Angelicos in the convent of San Marco. And she took long walks about the city and around it; and, one day in early spring, she found herself on the great terrace of San Miniato, sitting on the low stone wall and looking out at the great panorama presented by city, river, fruitful plain and glittering hills. She thought of the last visit she had paid this place, and of the man who had then stood at her side and pointed out the principal places of interest at their feet.

She had kept the memory of him very much at bay. Those last days with her husband had brought Anthony Marchmont nearer to her than ever before. The thought of Frank had been swept out of her mind, as it were, by an overmastering power, and she had scarcely dared to

call it back again. She had heard nothing of him. Moreover, she did not know whether he was still in the East, whether in England or Italy. She would not ask; she would not put out a finger or utter a syllable to bring him back; she would not make a sign. She knew that he might never come again. And what if he never came? At least, she would not have to veil her eyes or bend her head in shame when she met him, were it in the holiest places of this world or the next—at the marriage supper of the Lamb, the table of the Lord. She had been true to her faith, true to his trust in her; and she would not shrink from the possible darkness of the land, the life, that lay before her. But here, at San Miniato, she could hardly fail to think of him.

And as she thought, she turned—and he was there.

There, beside her, looking at her, bronzed by travel and the sun: straight, manly, beautiful he seemed to her as the sun god, with the light of a strong, true love in his clear eyes. She rose to her feet involuntarily, and held out her hand. She had pulled off her glove, and he took her hand in both his own and looked into her face.

‘I have heard,’ he said at last. ‘I know how you must have suffered—I understand. Will you give me the right to comfort you, Cecily, my love—my love?’

She drew a long breath, that was almost like a sob, as she lifted her eyes to his.

‘I was just thinking,’ she said, ‘that



in all the whole wide world I had no home—and my home has come to me at last.'

She meant—he understood—that her home was in his heart. So—what more need of words?

THE END

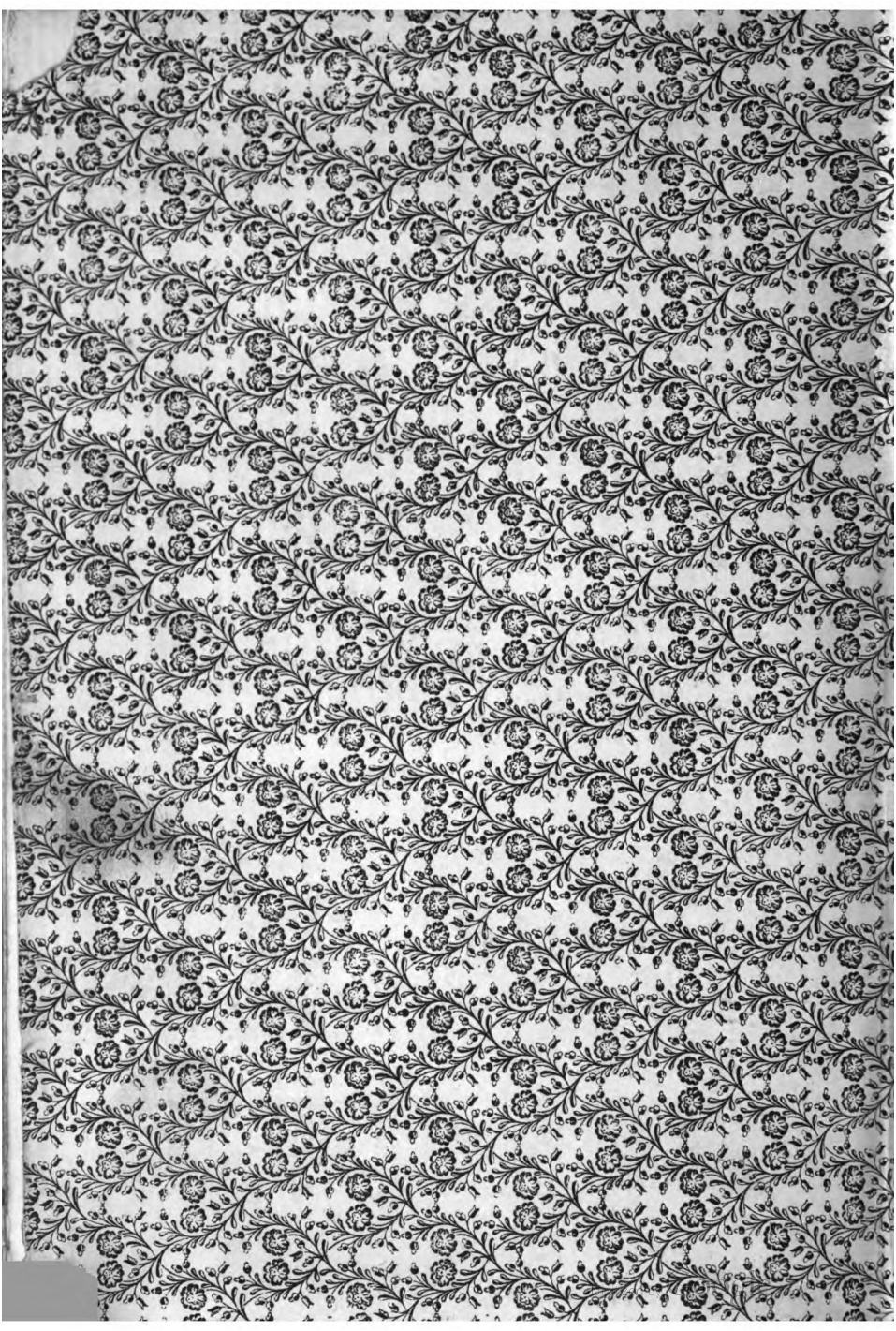
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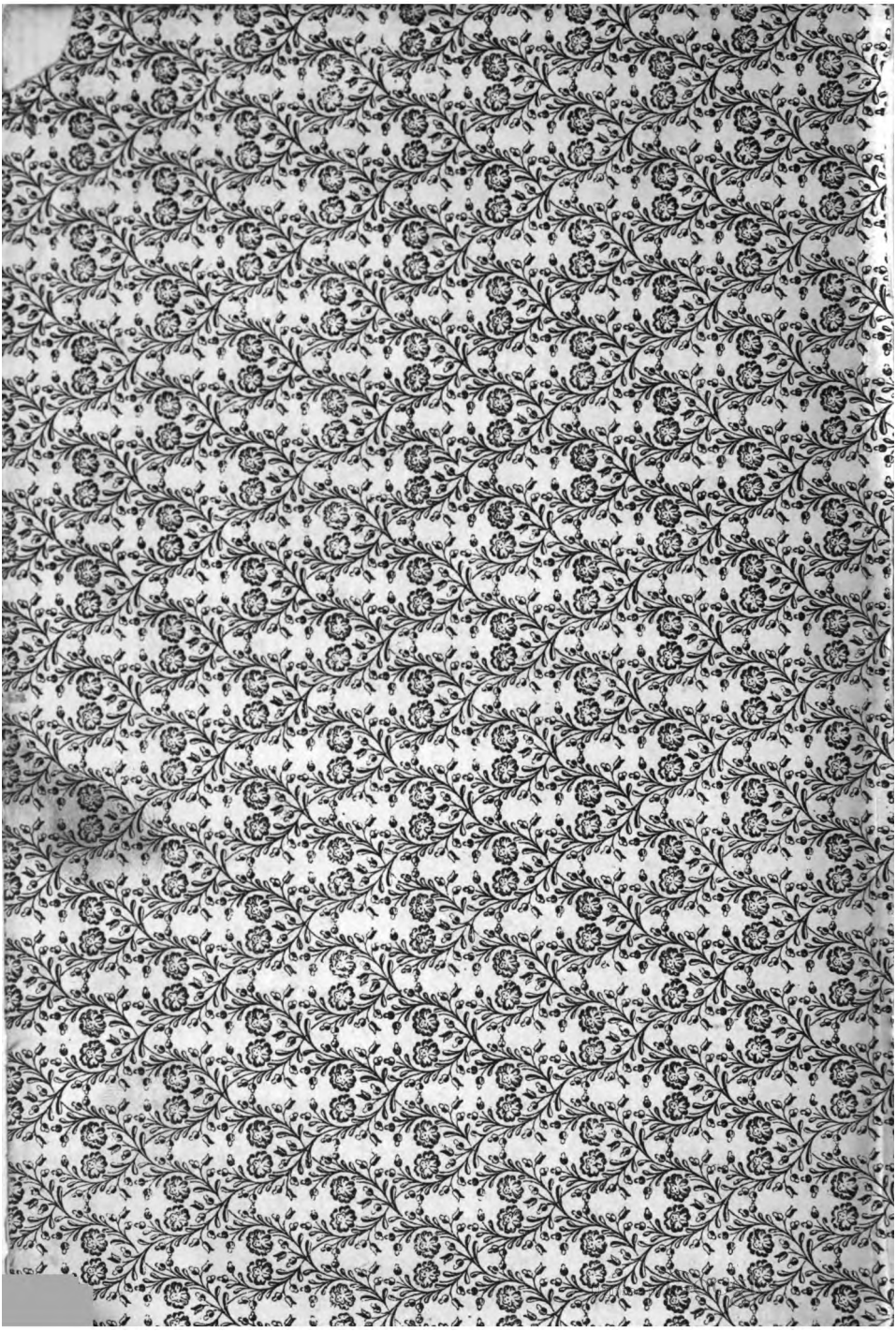


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